

(12) **United States Patent**
Ayliffe

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 9,293,311 B1**
(45) **Date of Patent:** **Mar. 22, 2016**

(54) **MICROFLUIDIC INTERROGATION DEVICE**

(71) Applicant: **Harold E. Ayliffe**, Hailey, ID (US)

(72) Inventor: **Harold E. Ayliffe**, Hailey, ID (US)

(73) Assignee: **E. I. SPECTRA, LLC**, Ketchum, ID (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 725 days.

(21) Appl. No.: **13/666,131**

(22) Filed: **Nov. 1, 2012**

Related U.S. Application Data

(63) Continuation-in-part of application No. 12/985,536, filed on Jan. 6, 2011, now Pat. No. 8,616,048, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 12/381,252, filed on Mar. 10, 2009, now Pat. No. 8,171,778, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 11/800,167, filed on May 4, 2007, now Pat. No. 7,520,164, application No. 13/666,131, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 12/378,757, filed on Feb. 19, 2009, now Pat. No. 8,072,603, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 11/701,711, filed on Feb. 2, 2007, now Pat. No. 7,515,268, application No. 13/666,131, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. PCT/US2009/002172, filed on Apr. 7, 2009.

(60) Provisional application No. 60/798,155, filed on May 5, 2006, provisional application No. 60/764,697, filed on Feb. 2, 2006, provisional application No. 61/123,248, filed on Apr. 7, 2008, provisional application No. 61/124,121, filed on Apr. 14, 2008.

(51) **Int. Cl.**

G01N 27/00 (2006.01)
G01N 35/00 (2006.01)
B01L 99/00 (2010.01)
G06F 17/40 (2006.01)
G06F 19/00 (2011.01)
H01J 49/00 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC **H01J 49/0022** (2013.01); **G01N 27/00** (2013.01); **G01N 35/00** (2013.01); **H01J 49/0013** (2013.01); **B01L 99/00** (2013.01); **G01N 2035/00306** (2013.01); **G06F 17/40** (2013.01); **G06F 19/00** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

None
See application file for complete search history.

(56) **References Cited**

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

2,656,508	A	10/1953	Colter
3,910,702	A	10/1975	Corll
4,130,754	A	12/1978	Fosslien
4,164,870	A	8/1979	Scordato et al.
4,488,814	A	12/1984	Johnson
4,873,875	A	10/1989	Cork
5,126,022	A	6/1992	Soane et al.

(Continued)

Primary Examiner — Edward Cosimano

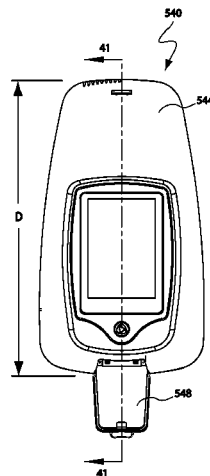
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — Foster Pepper PLLC; P. G. Scott Born

(57)

ABSTRACT

A portable, stand-alone microfluidic interrogation device including a microprocessor and a touch-screen display. The touch-screen display can receive one or more user input to select a particular particle interrogation procedure, and subsequently show interrogation results. A microfluidic path extending through the interrogation device includes alignment structure that defines an interrogation zone in which particles carried in a fluid are urged toward single-file travel. Operable alignment structure may define sheath-, or non-sheath fluid flow. Desirably, a portion of the alignment structure is removable from the device in a tool-free procedure. The device may operate under the Coulter principle, and/or detect Stokes' shift phenomena, and/or other optically-based signal(s).

22 Claims, 44 Drawing Sheets



US 9,293,311 B1

Page 2

(56)

References Cited

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

5,338,427 A 8/1994 Shartle et al.
5,376,878 A 12/1994 Fisher
5,459,406 A 10/1995 Louge
5,516,564 A 5/1996 Root et al.
5,695,092 A 12/1997 Schrandt
5,800,690 A 9/1998 Chow et al.
5,933,707 A 8/1999 Ayliffe et al.
6,045,676 A 4/2000 Mathies et al.
6,091,975 A 7/2000 Daddona et al.
6,169,394 B1 1/2001 Frazier et al.
6,285,807 B1 9/2001 Walt et al.
6,382,228 B1 5/2002 Cabuz et al.
6,396,584 B1 5/2002 Taguchi et al.
6,426,615 B1 7/2002 Mehta
6,427,551 B2 * 8/2002 Iizuka 74/333
6,437,551 B1 8/2002 Krulevitch et al.
6,440,725 B1 8/2002 Pourahmadi et al.
6,454,945 B1 9/2002 Weigl et al.
6,488,896 B2 12/2002 Weigl et al.
6,638,482 B1 10/2003 Ackley et al.
6,656,431 B2 12/2003 Holl et al.
6,663,353 B2 12/2003 Lipscomb et al.
6,674,525 B2 1/2004 Bardell et al.
6,703,819 B2 3/2004 Gascoyne et al.
6,794,877 B2 9/2004 Blomberg et al.
6,816,257 B2 11/2004 Goix
6,979,817 B2 * 12/2005 Yamauchi et al. 250/288
7,204,139 B2 4/2007 Takayama
7,223,363 B2 5/2007 McNeely et al.
7,223,371 B2 5/2007 Hayenga et al.
7,235,400 B2 6/2007 Adey

7,332,902 B1 2/2008 Vermeire et al.
7,392,908 B2 7/2008 Frazier
7,410,809 B2 8/2008 Goix et al.
7,417,418 B1 8/2008 Ayliffe
7,515,268 B1 4/2009 Ayliffe et al.
7,520,164 B1 4/2009 Ayliffe
7,579,823 B1 8/2009 Ayliffe
7,835,000 B2 11/2010 Graves et al.
8,153,949 B2 4/2012 Kiesel et al.
8,171,778 B2 * 5/2012 Ayliffe G01N 15/1056
324/71.1
8,188,438 B2 5/2012 Li
8,616,048 B2 * 12/2013 Ayliffe B01L 3/502715
324/71.1
8,743,352 B2 6/2014 Gong
9,126,159 B2 * 9/2015 Kim B01L 3/502707
2002/0061260 A1 5/2002 Husar
2002/0117517 A1 8/2002 Unger et al.
2002/0149766 A1 10/2002 Bardell et al.
2003/0180965 A1 9/2003 Yobas et al.
2004/0037739 A1 2/2004 McNeely et al.
2004/0151629 A1 8/2004 Pease et al.
2005/0054078 A1 3/2005 Miller et al.
2005/0118705 A1 6/2005 Rabbill et al.
2005/0121608 A1 * 6/2005 Yamauchi et al. 250/288
2005/0255600 A1 11/2005 Padmanabhan et al.
2006/0073609 A1 4/2006 Shimizu
2009/0272179 A1 * 11/2009 Ayliffe G01N 15/12
73/61.71
2011/0162439 A1 * 7/2011 Ayliffe G01N 15/1056
73/61.71
2014/0199776 A1 * 7/2014 Kim B01L 3/502707
436/165

* cited by examiner

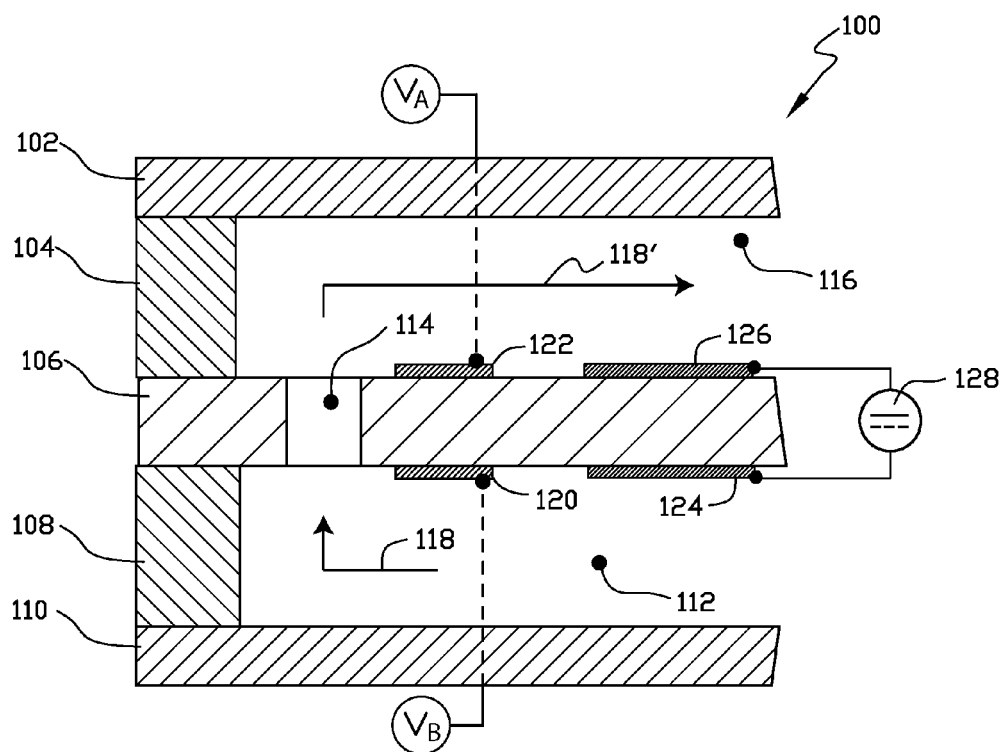


FIG. 1

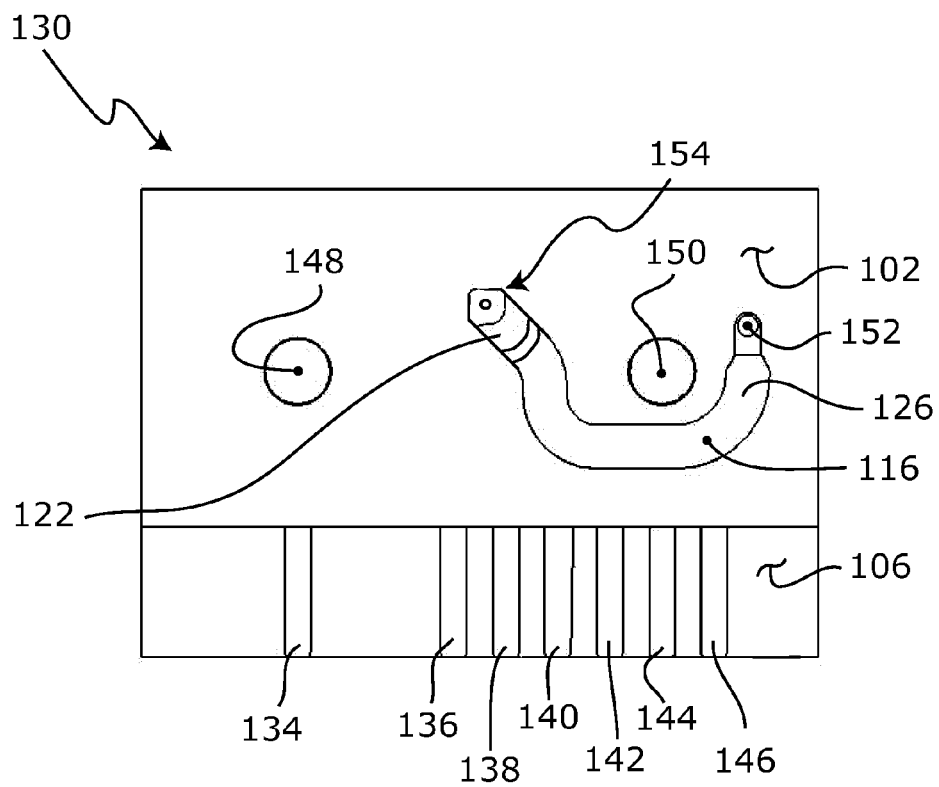


FIG. 2

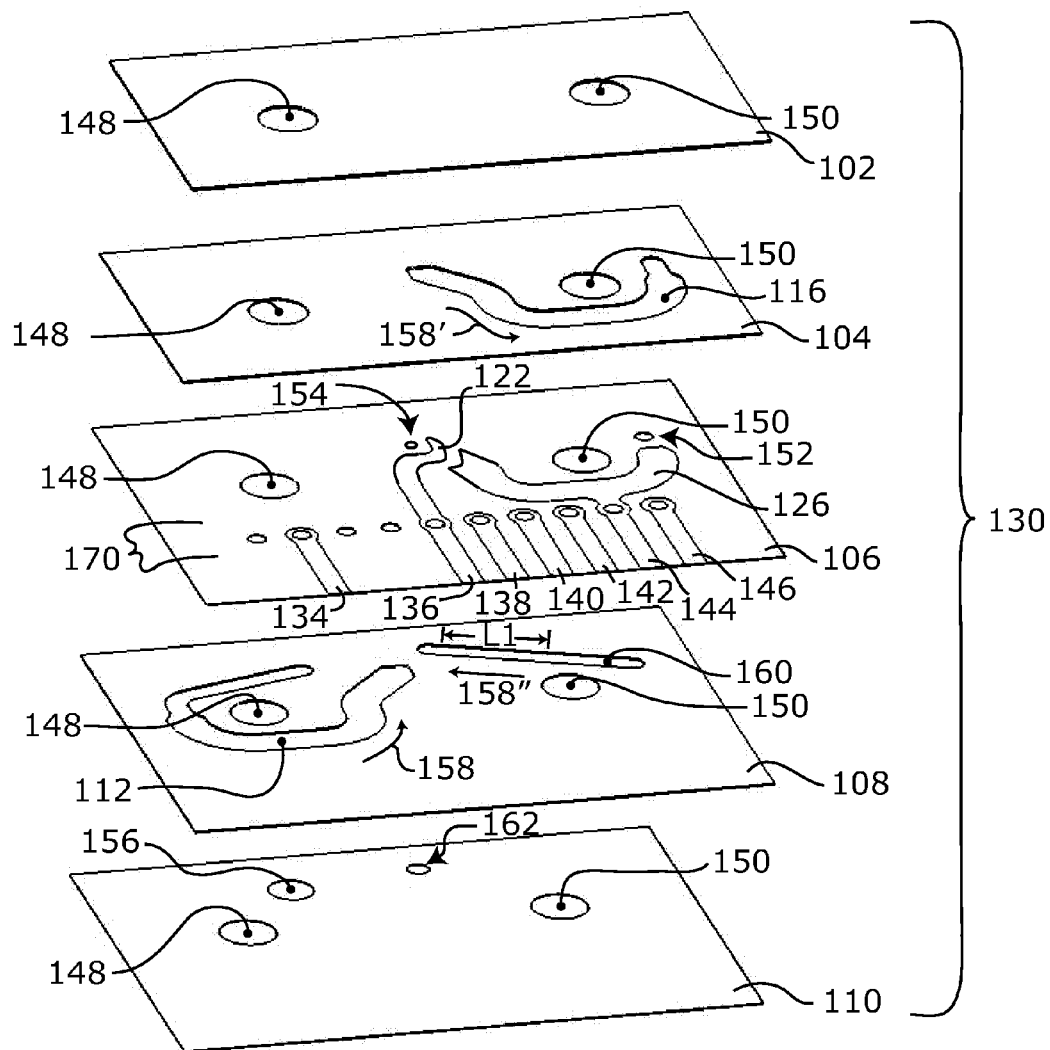


FIG. 3

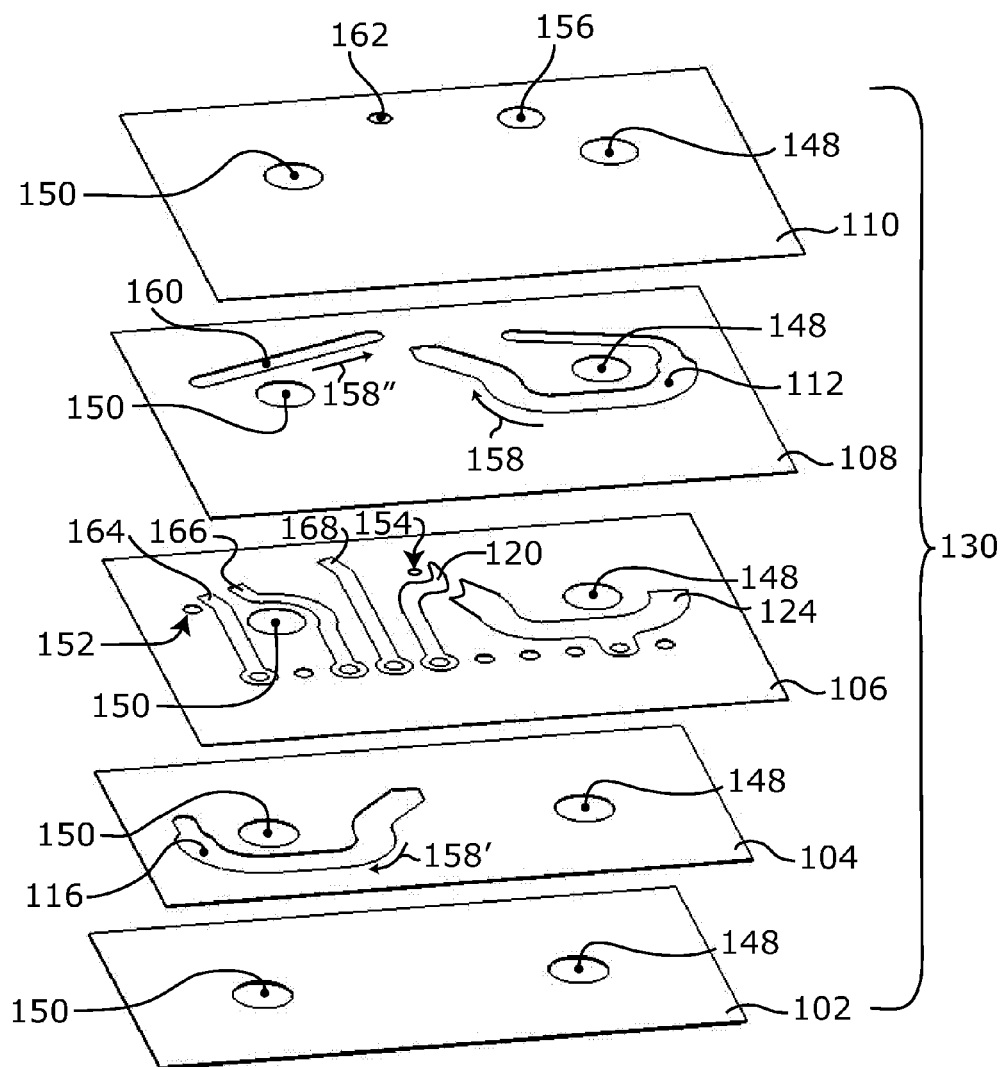


FIG. 4

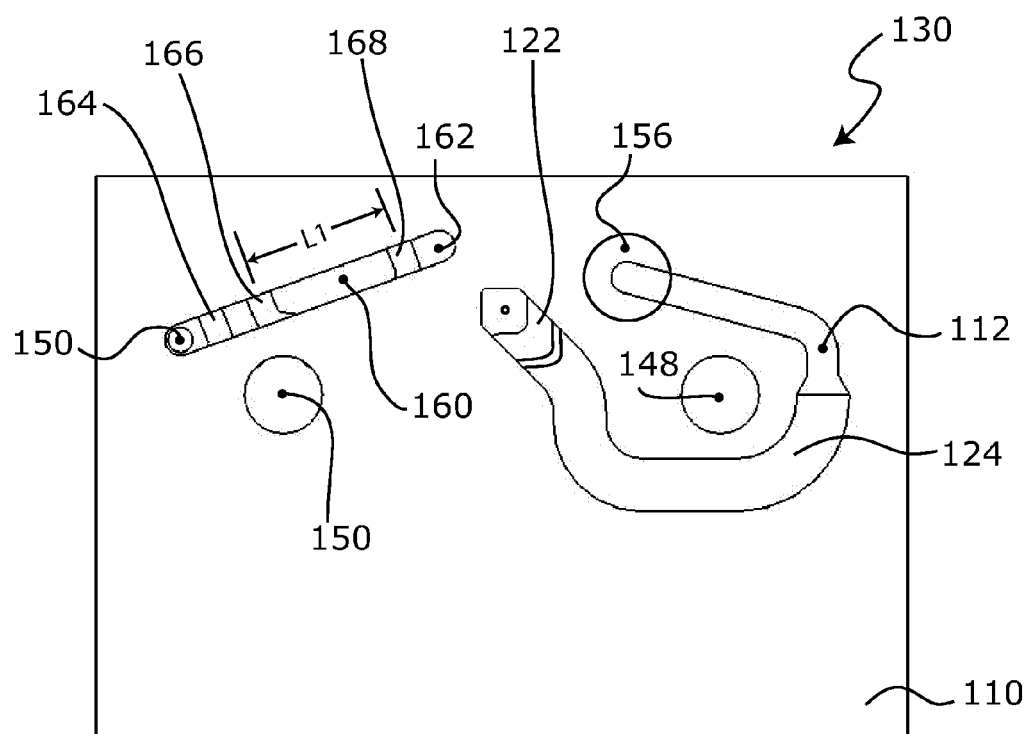


FIG. 5

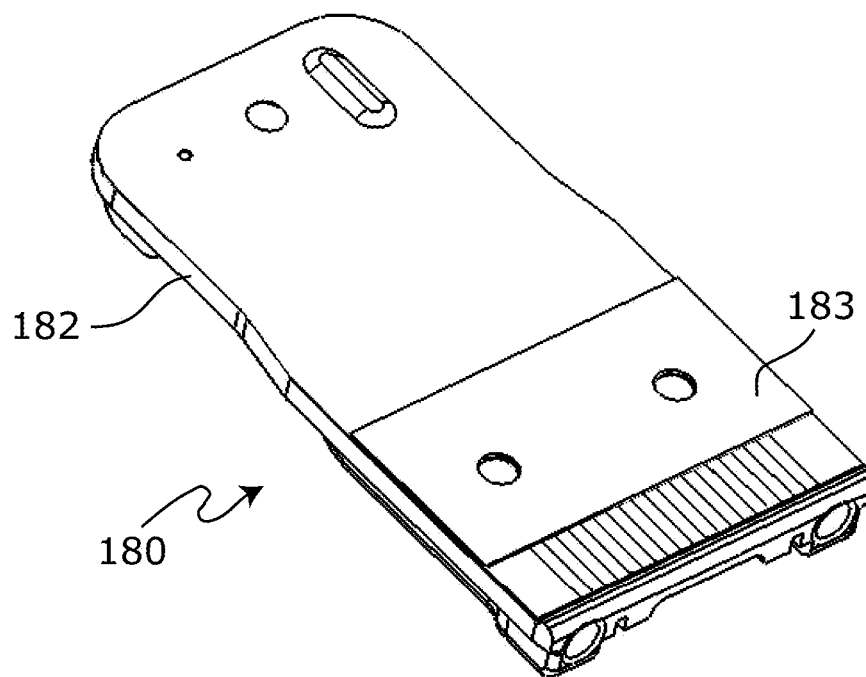


FIG. 6

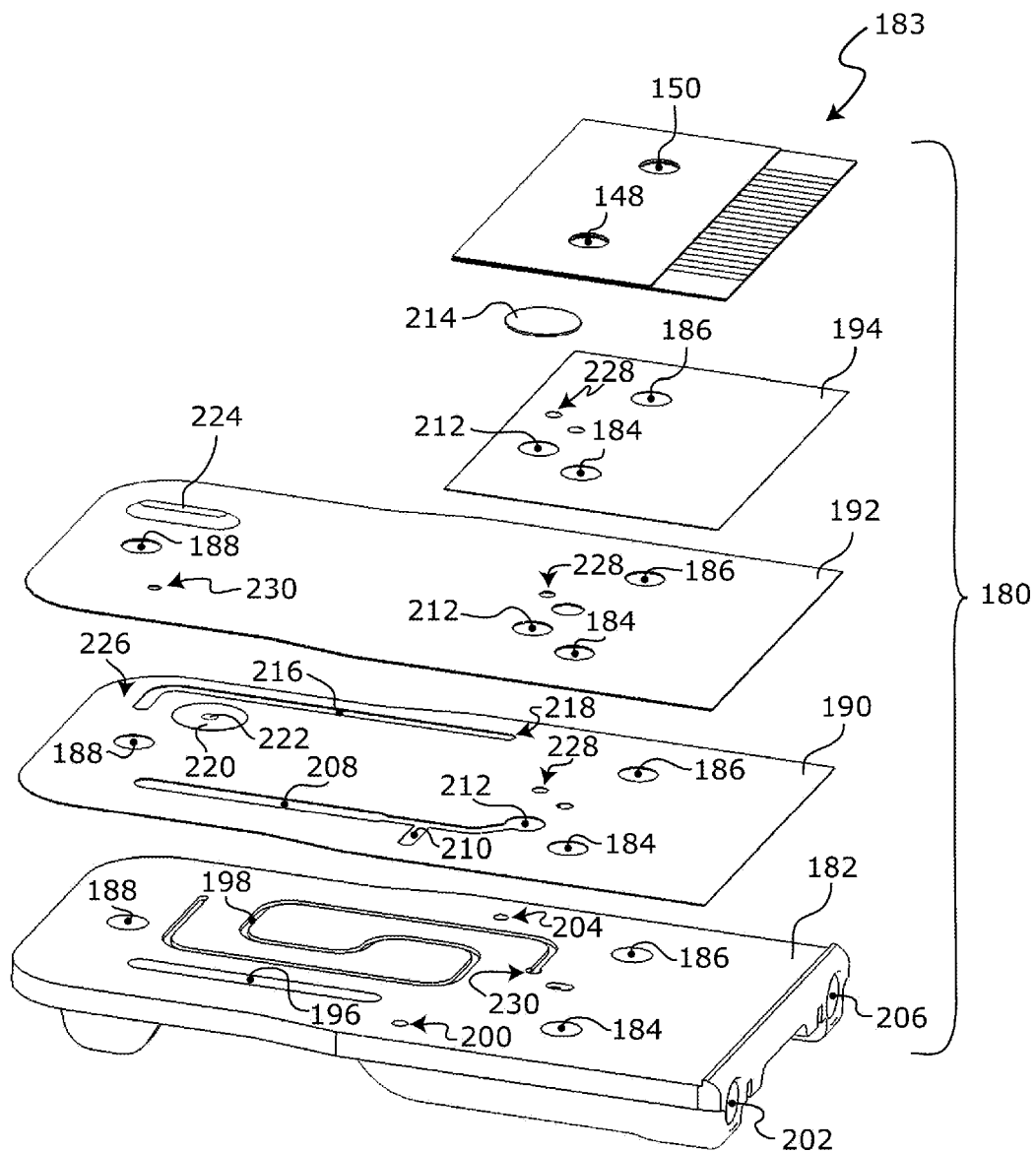


FIG. 7

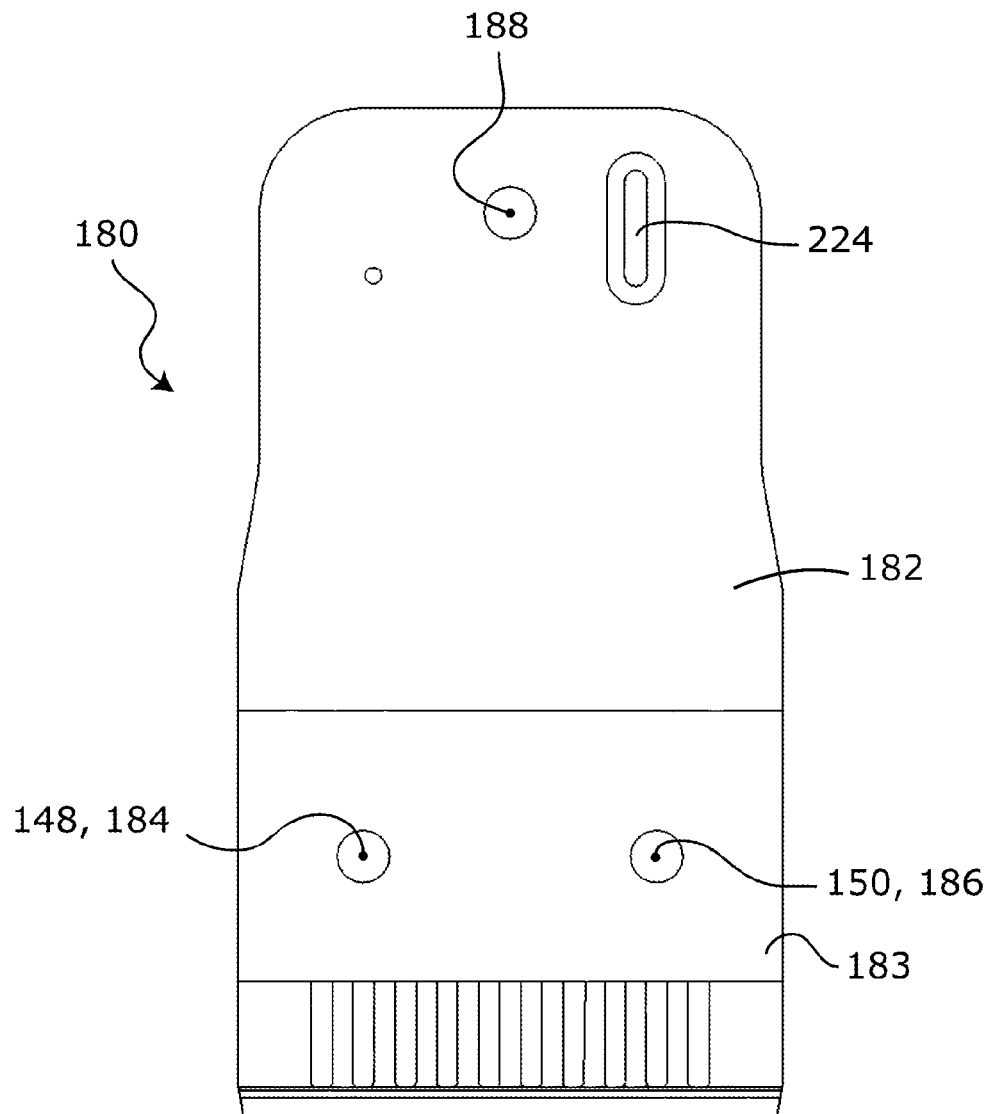


FIG. 8

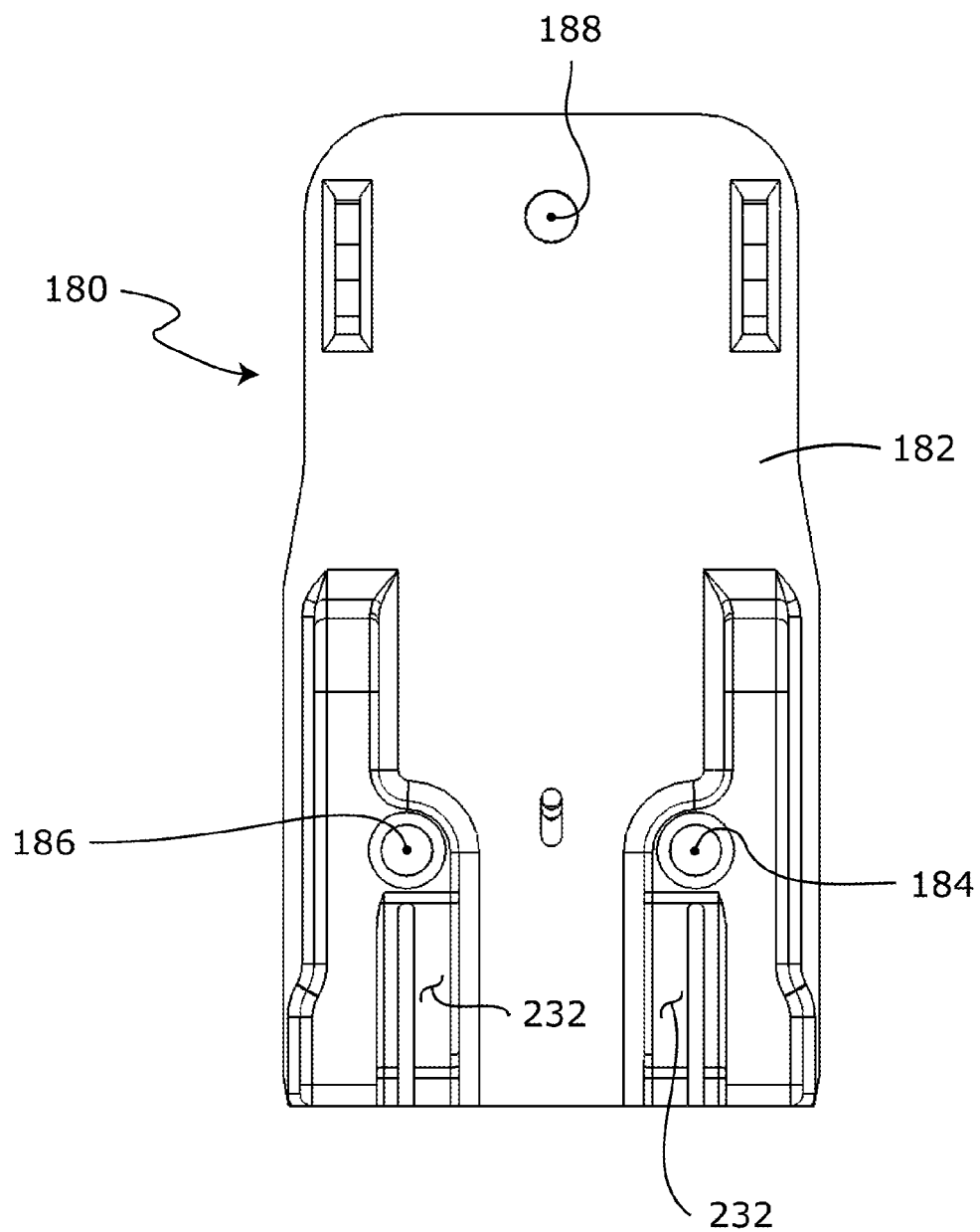


FIG. 9

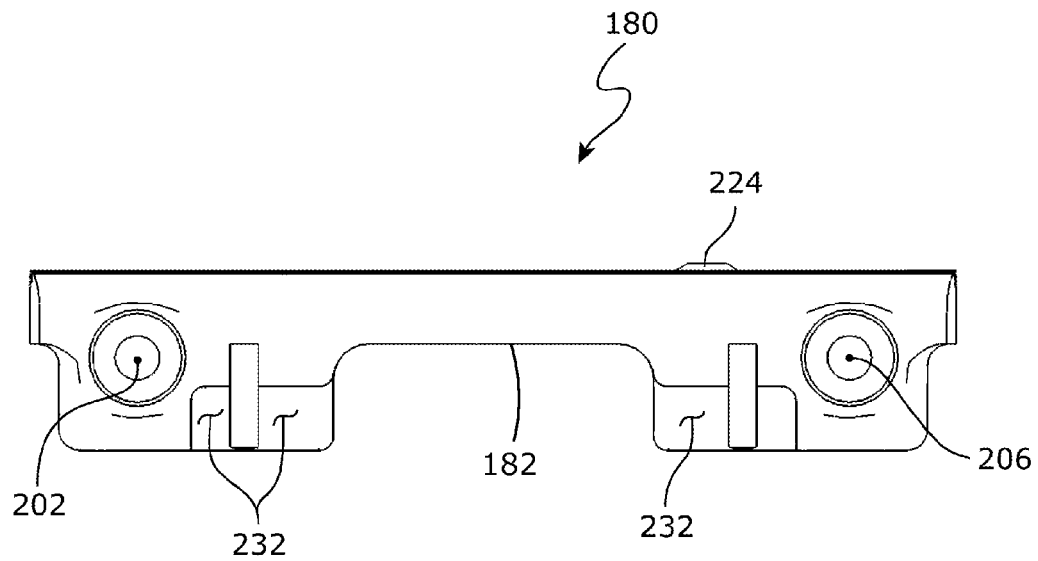


FIG. 10

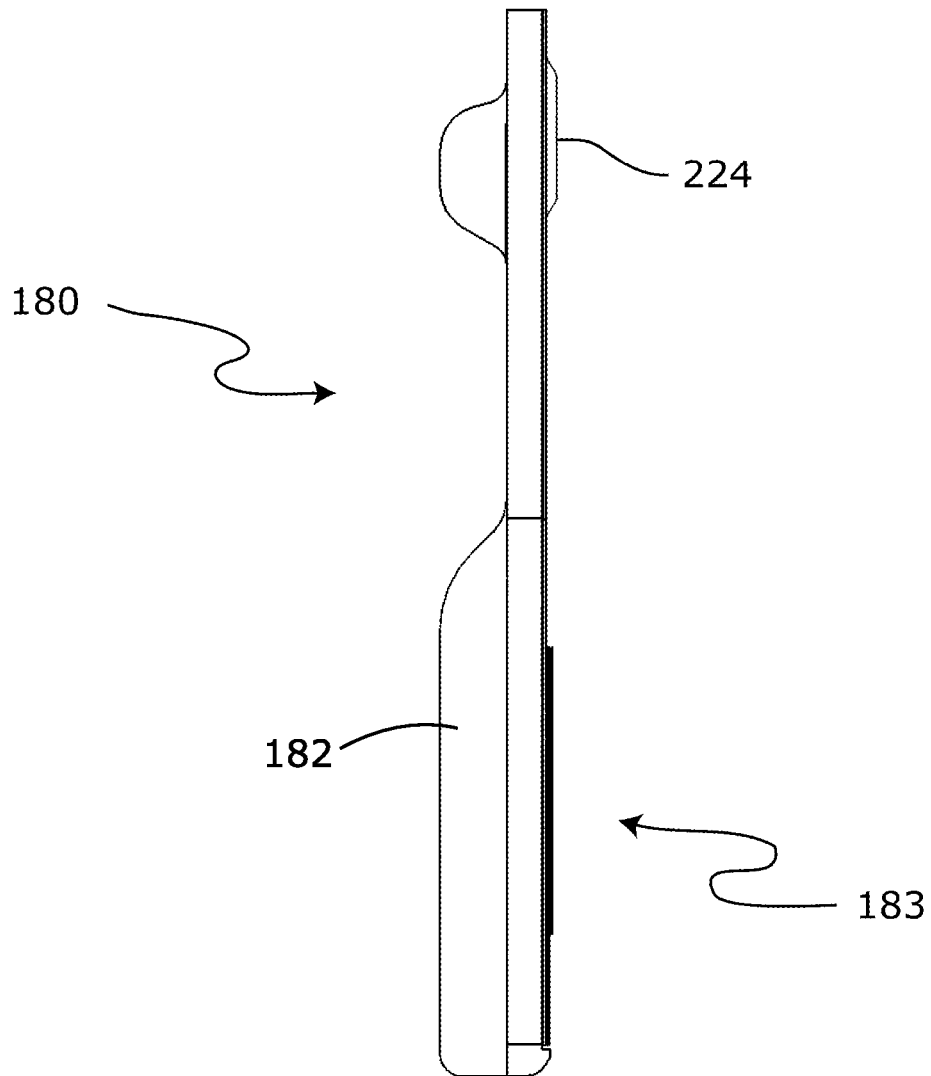


FIG. 11

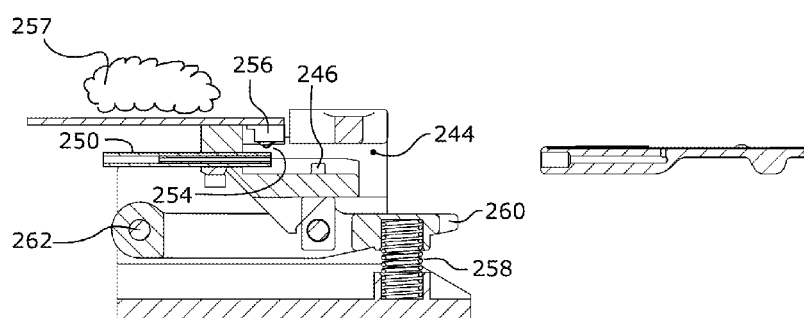


FIG. 13

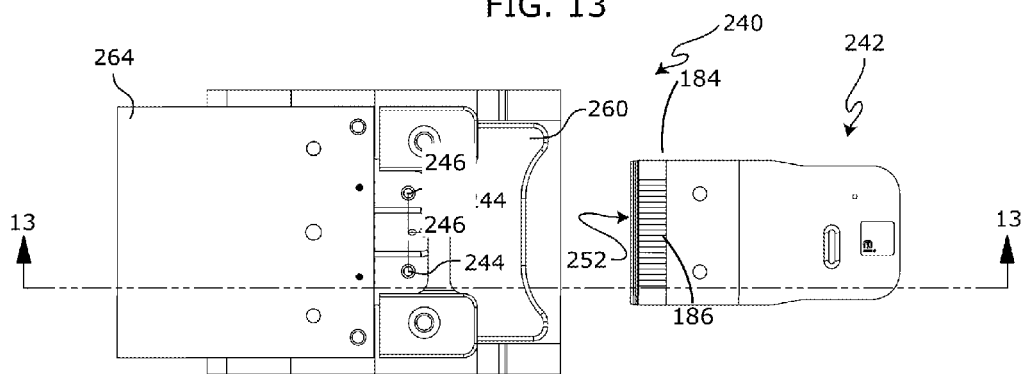


FIG. 12

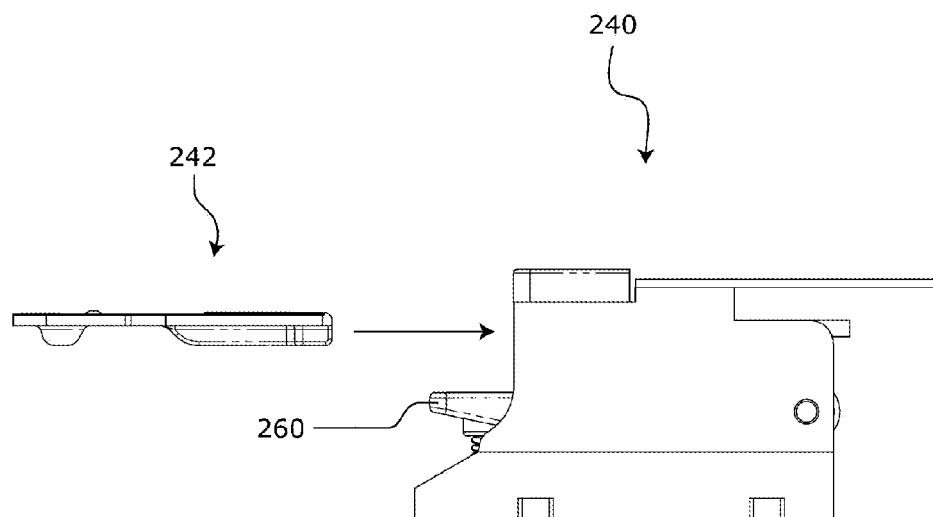


FIG. 14

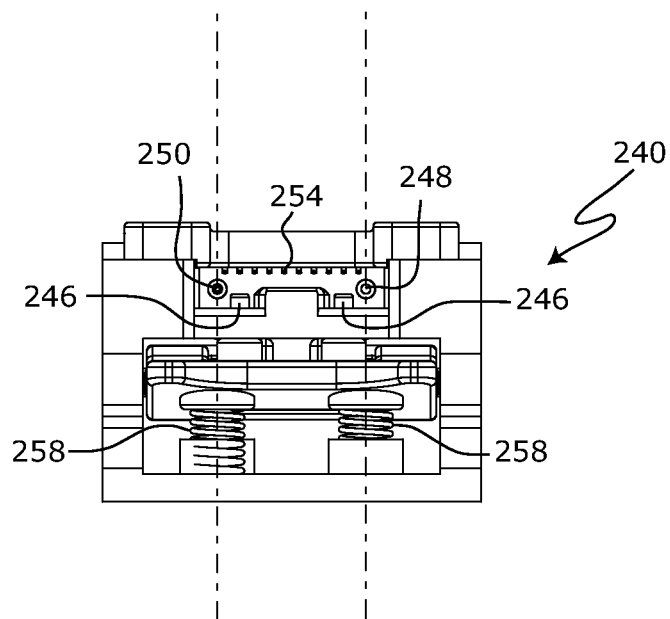


FIG. 15

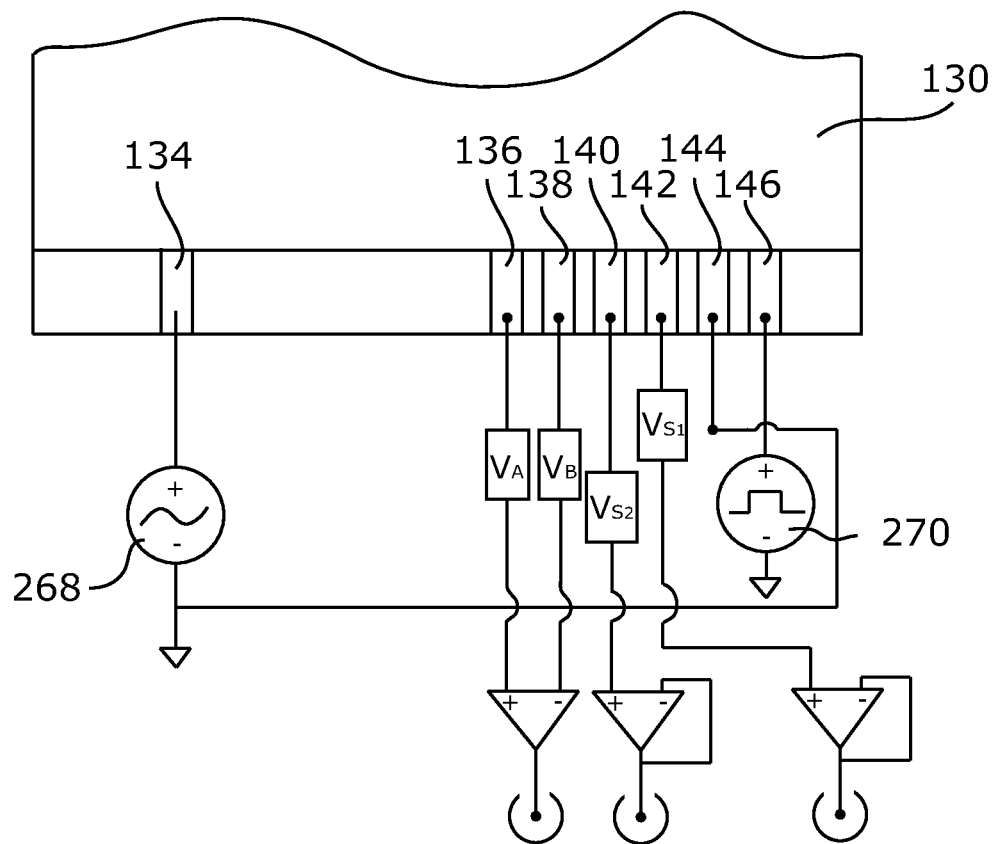


FIG. 16

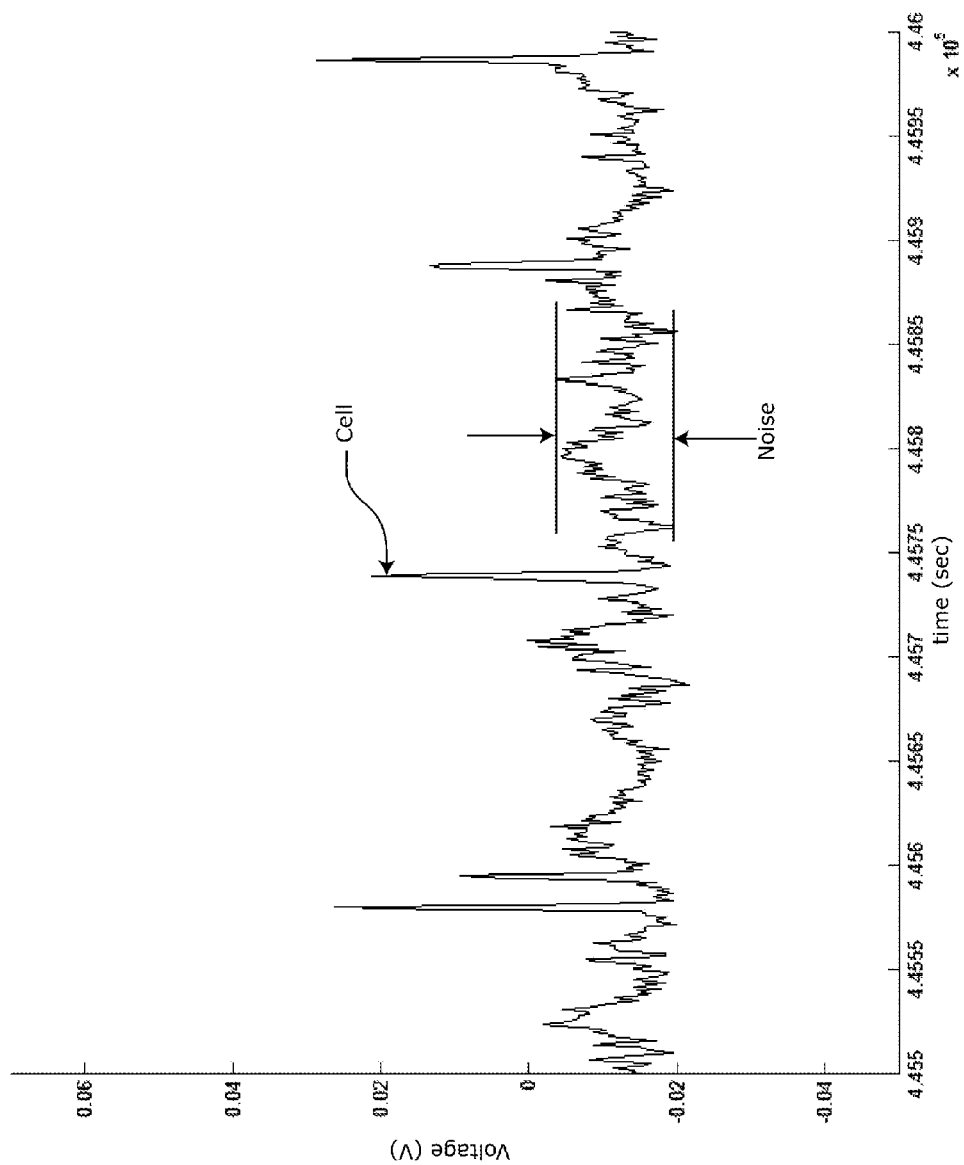


FIG. 17

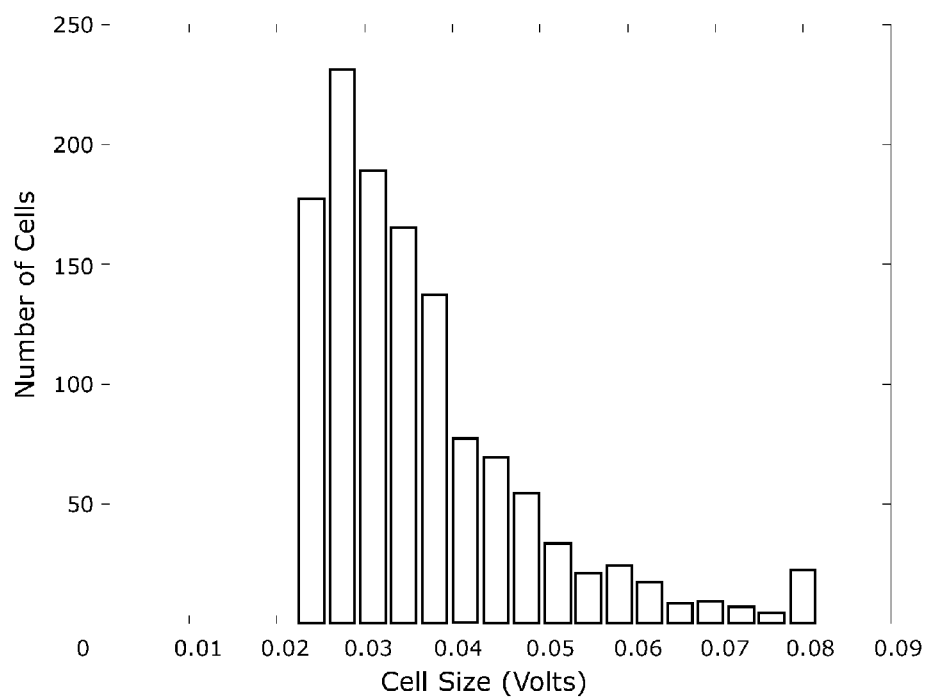
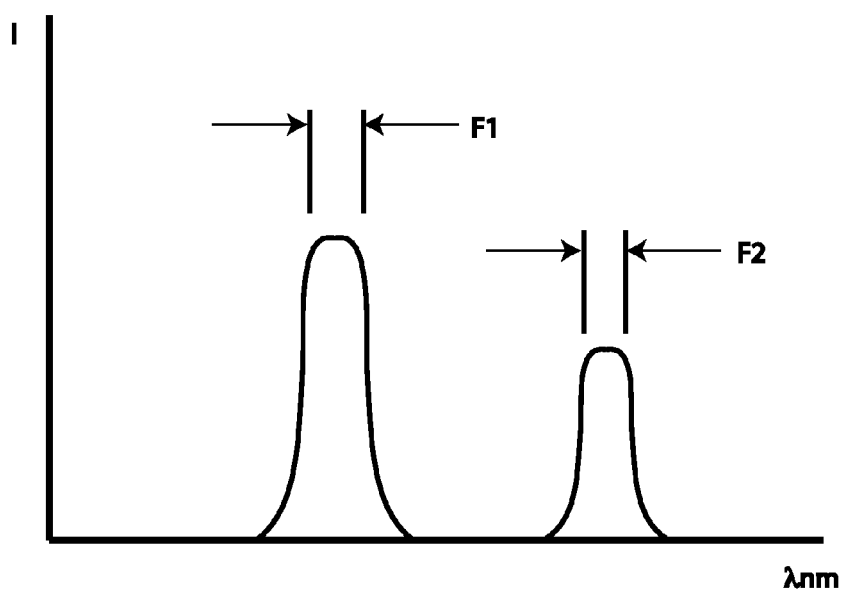


FIG. 18

**FIG. 19**

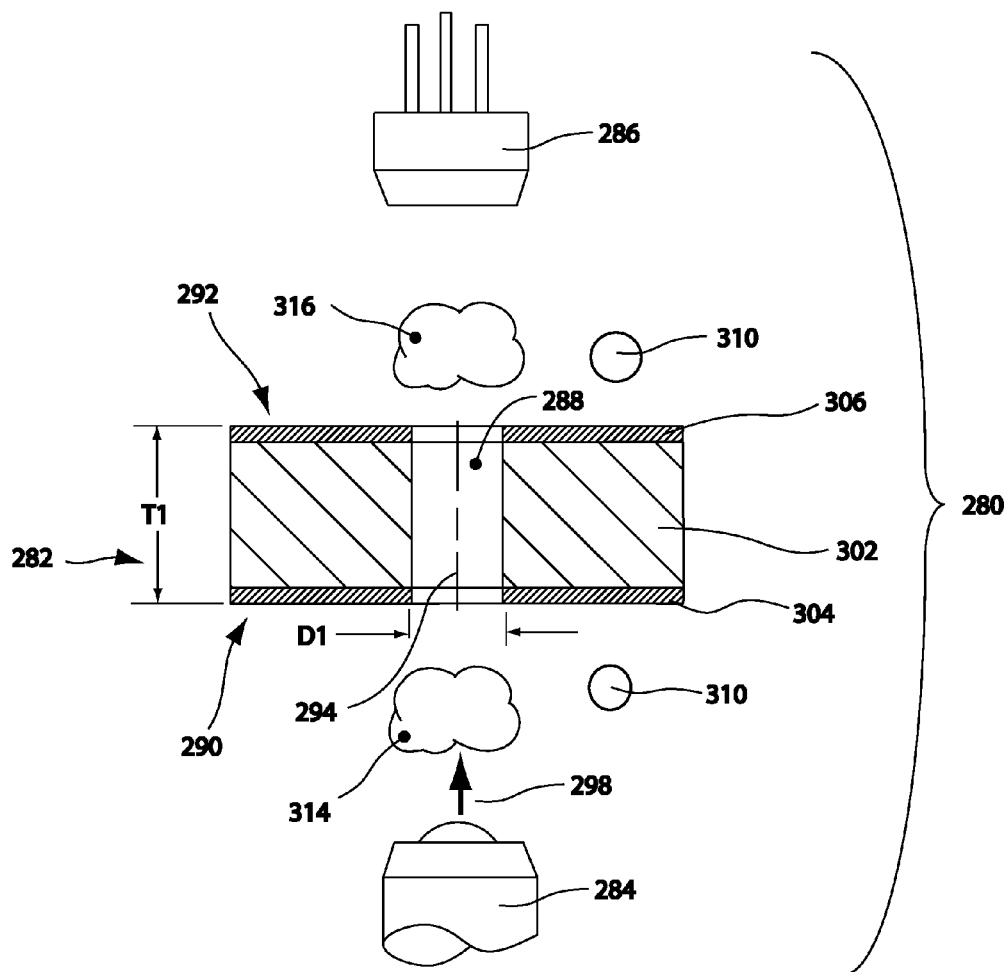


FIG. 20A

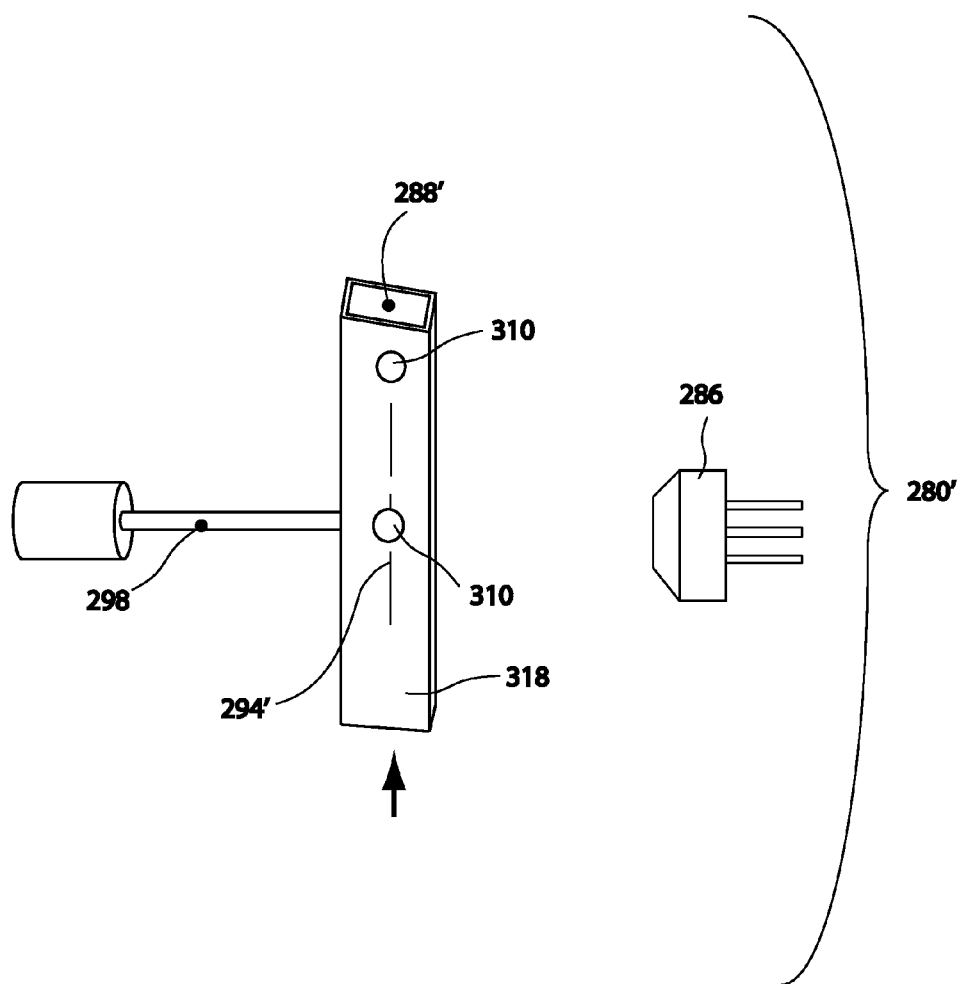


FIG. 20B

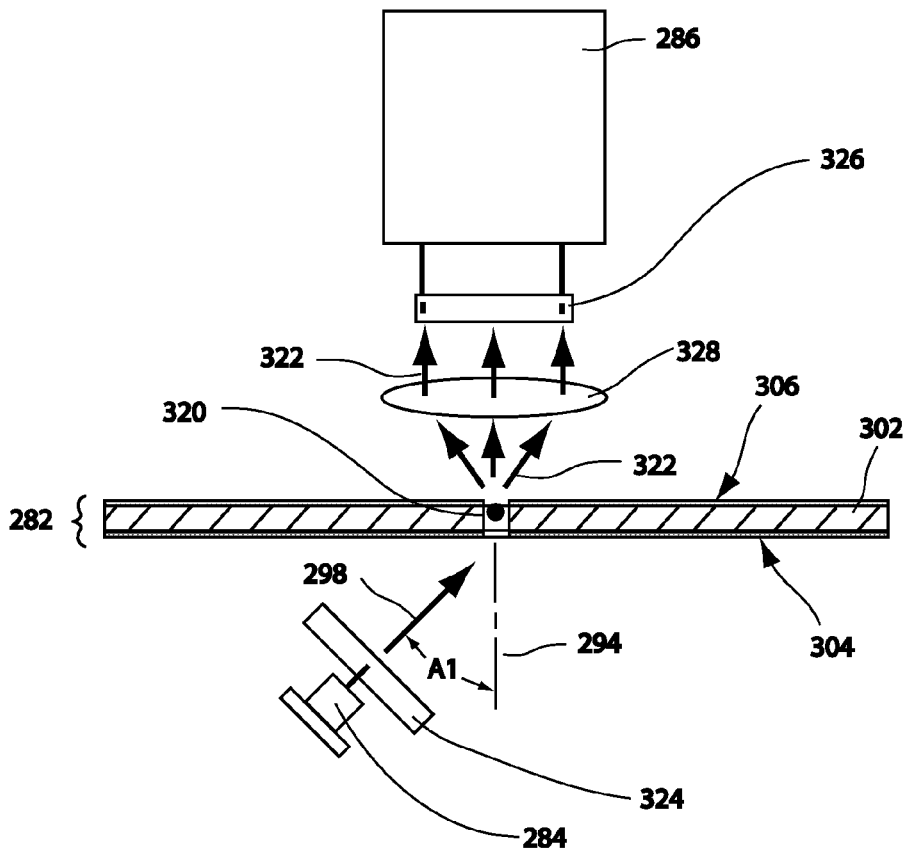


FIG. 21

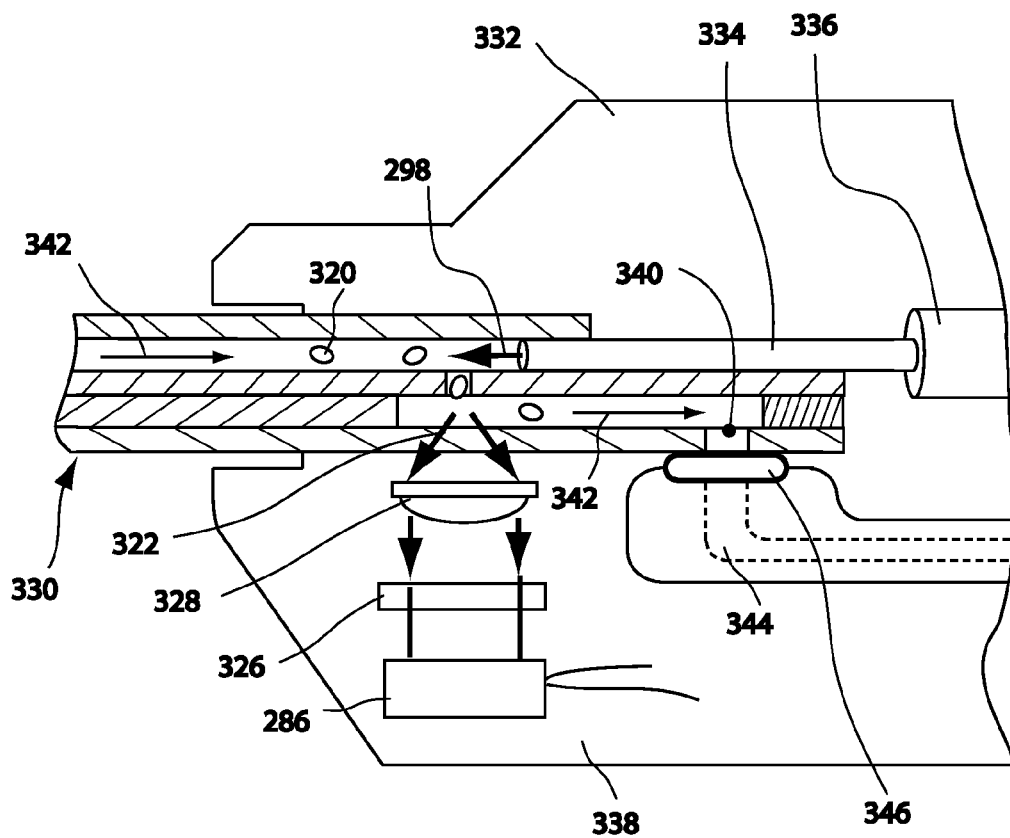


FIG. 22

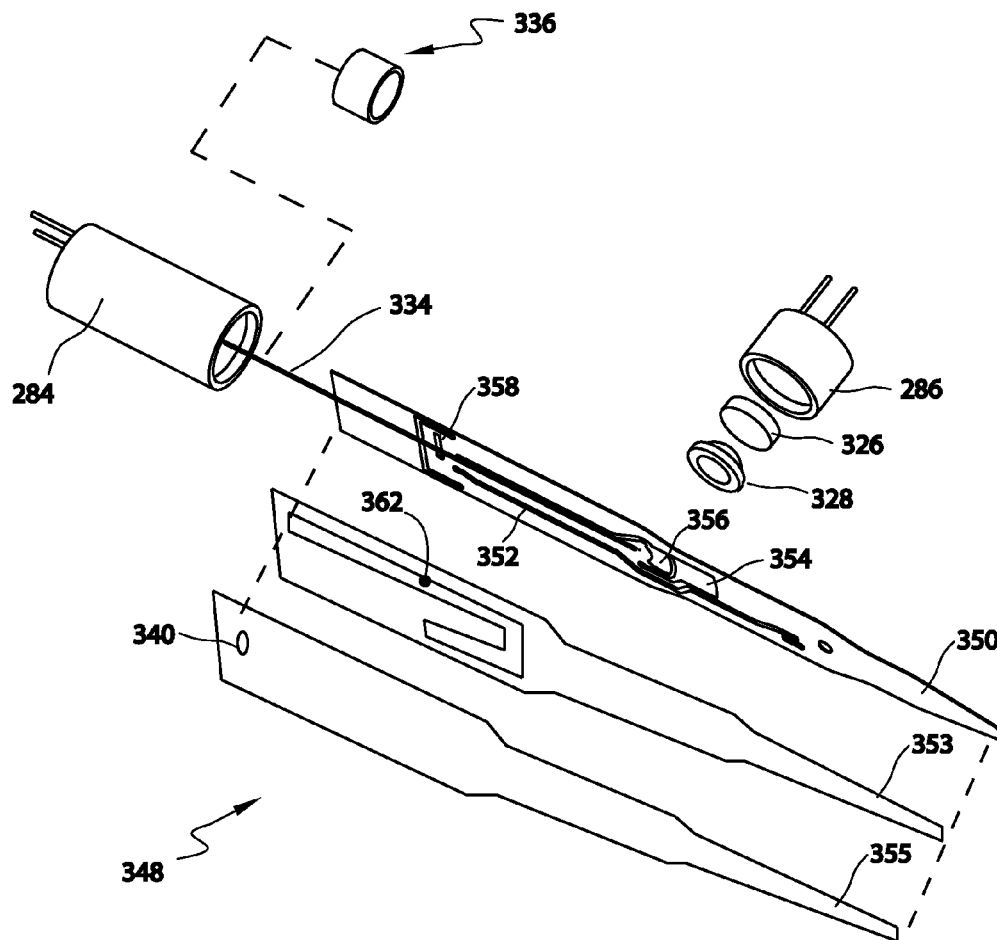


FIG. 23

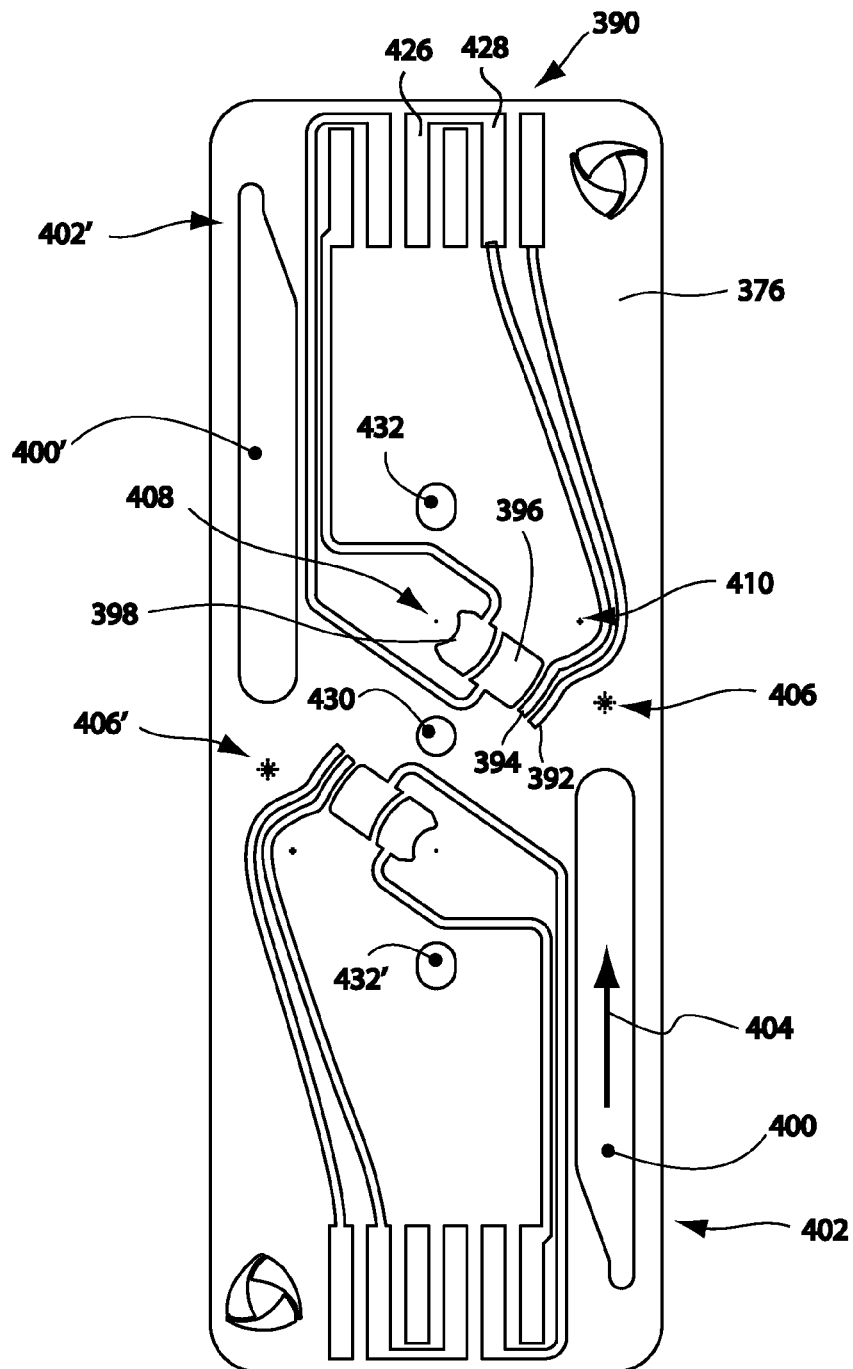


FIG. 24

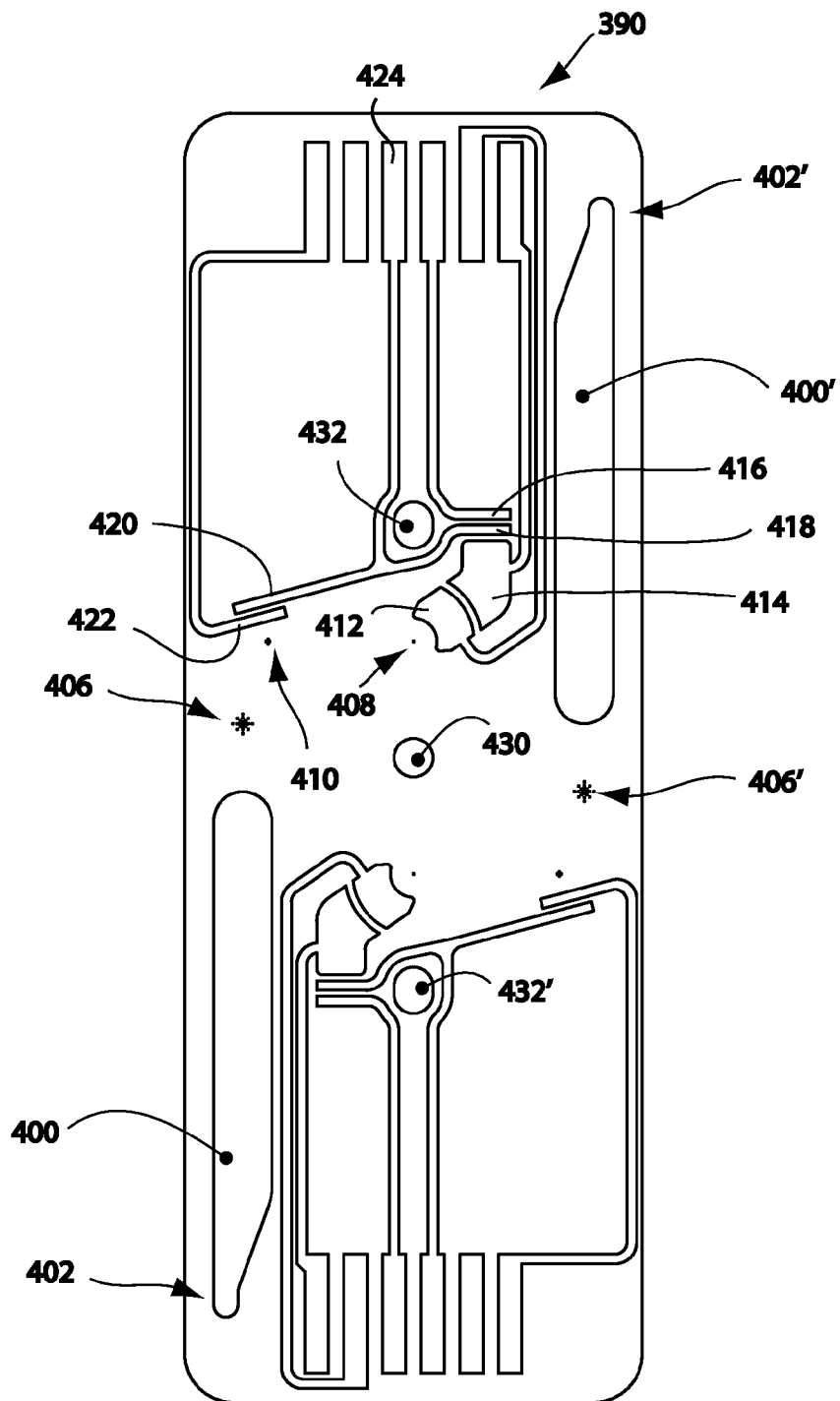


FIG. 25

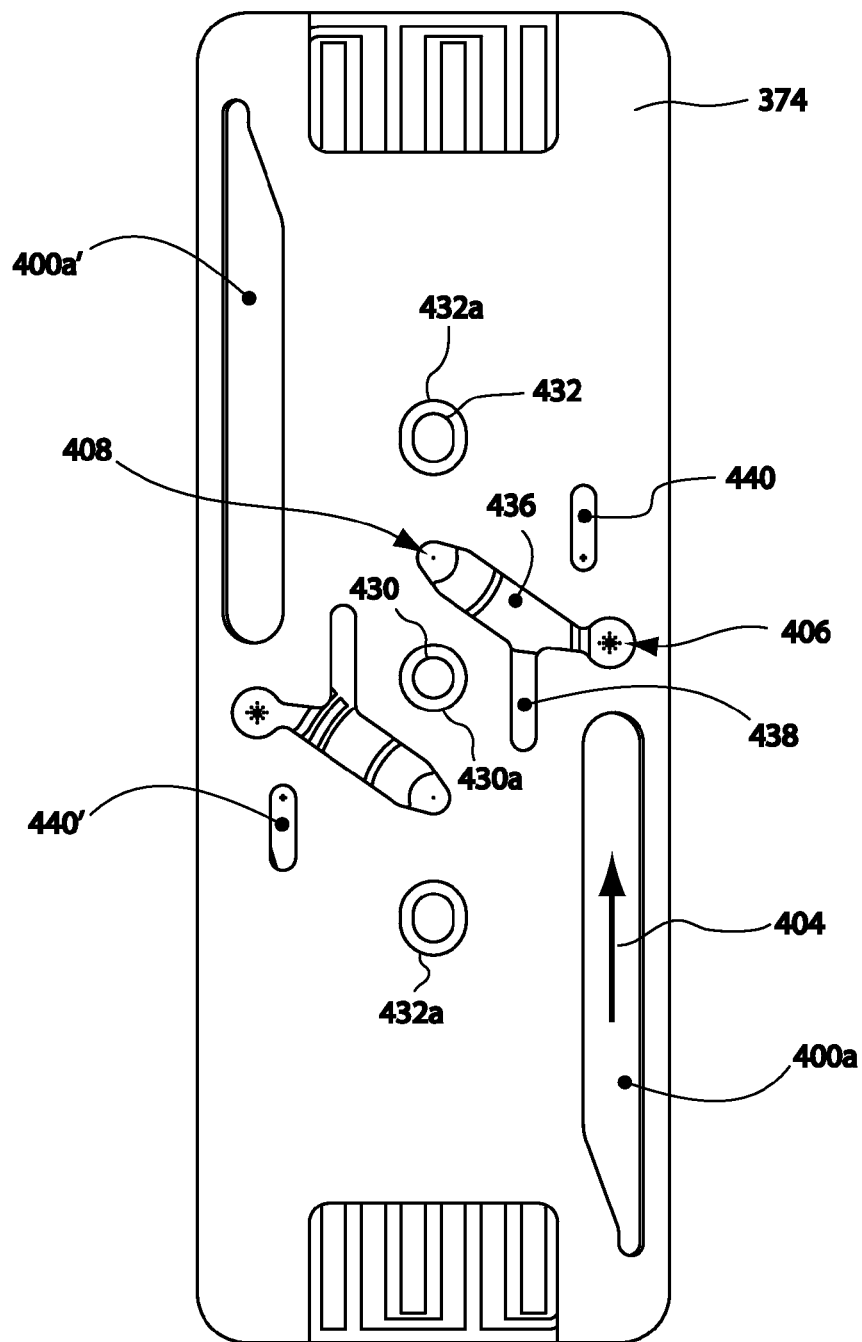


FIG. 26

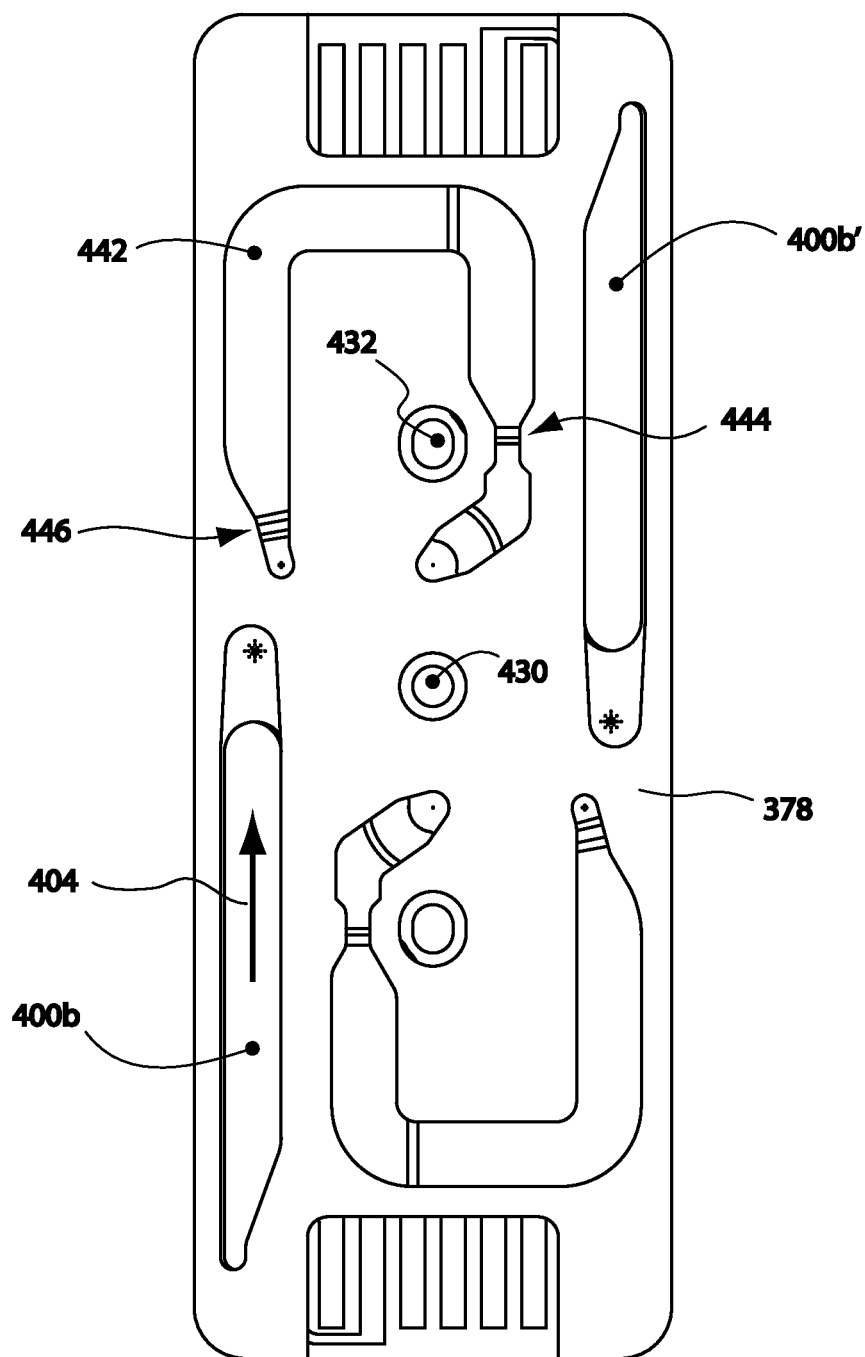


FIG. 27

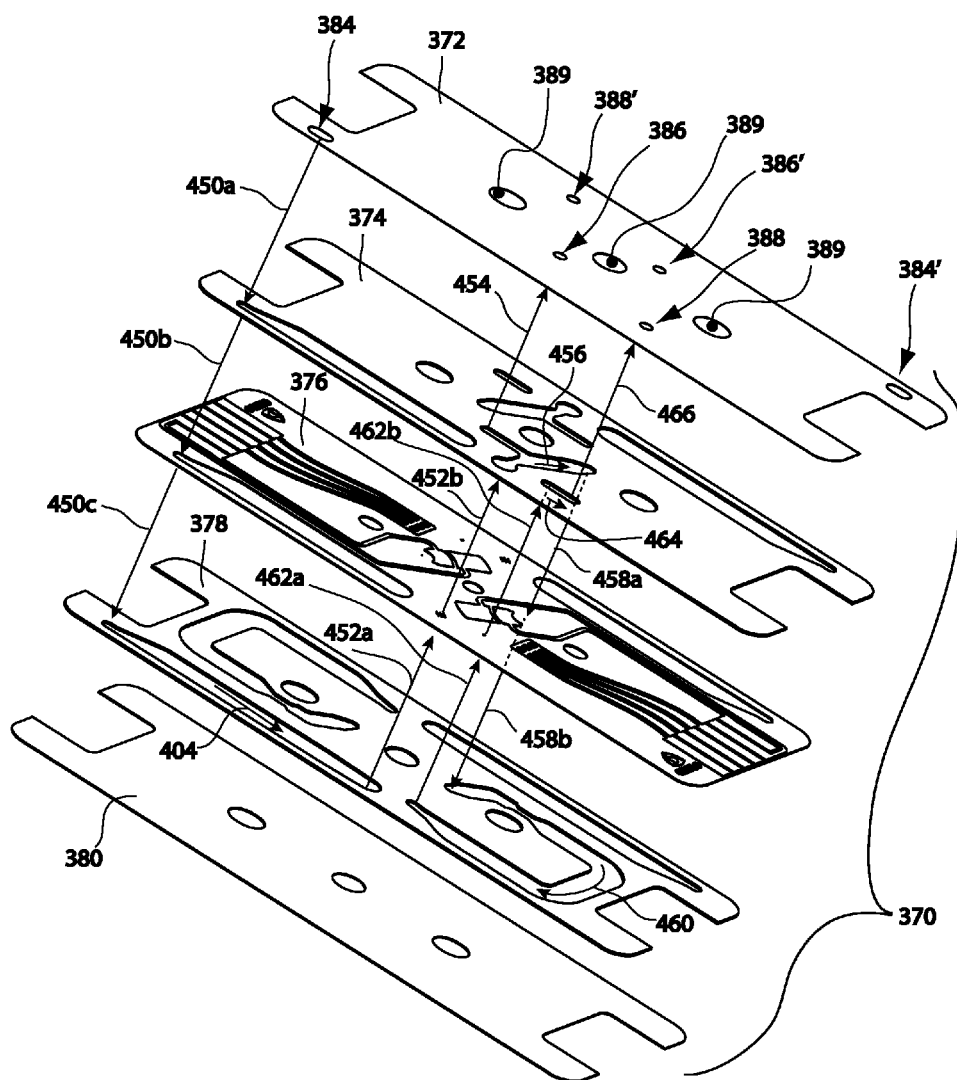


FIG. 28

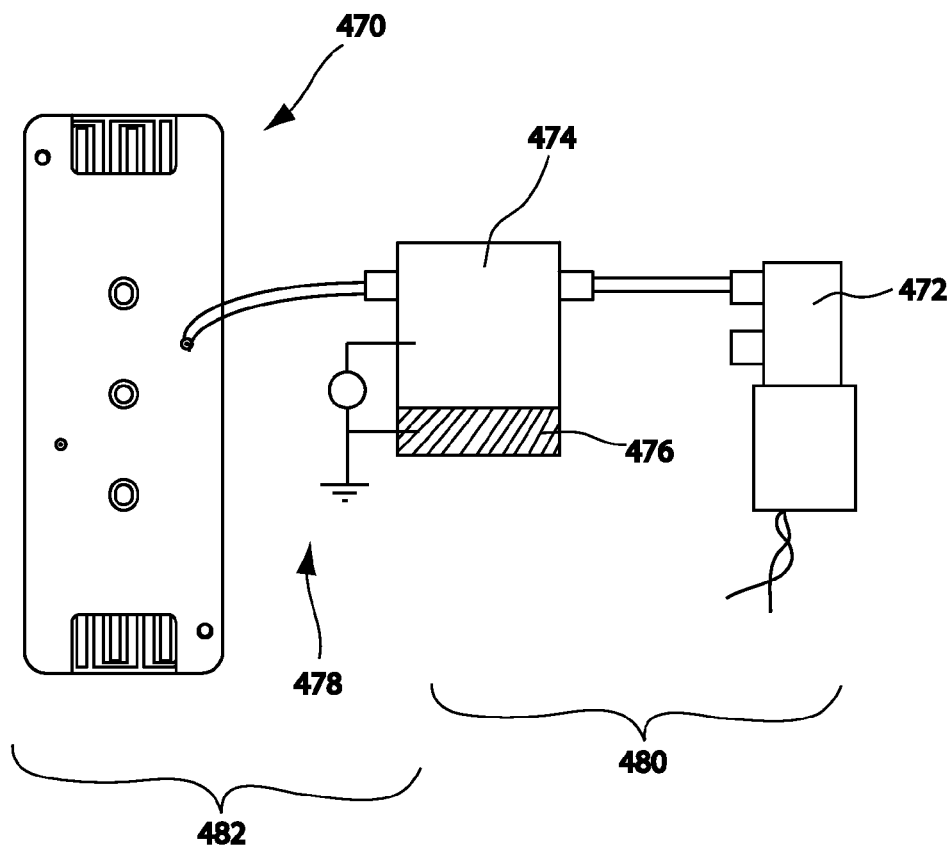


FIG. 29

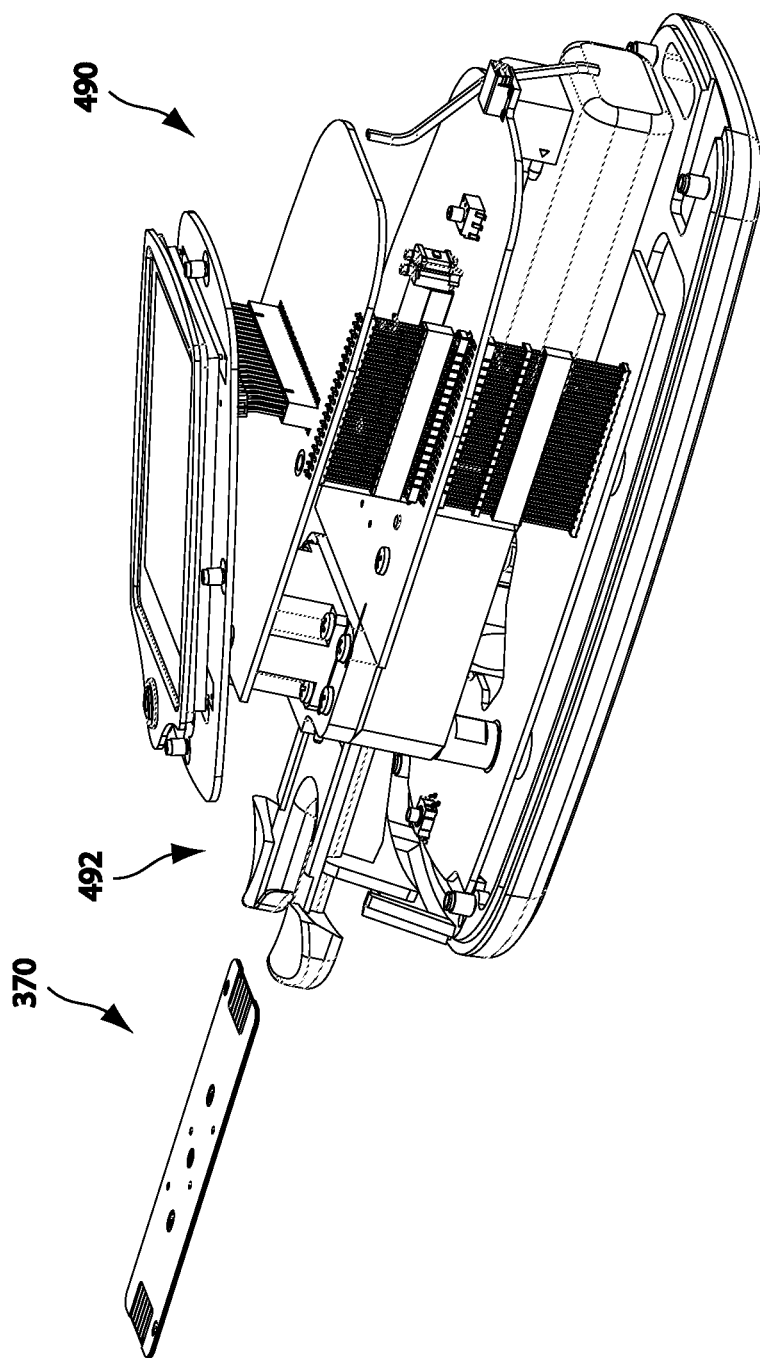


FIG. 30

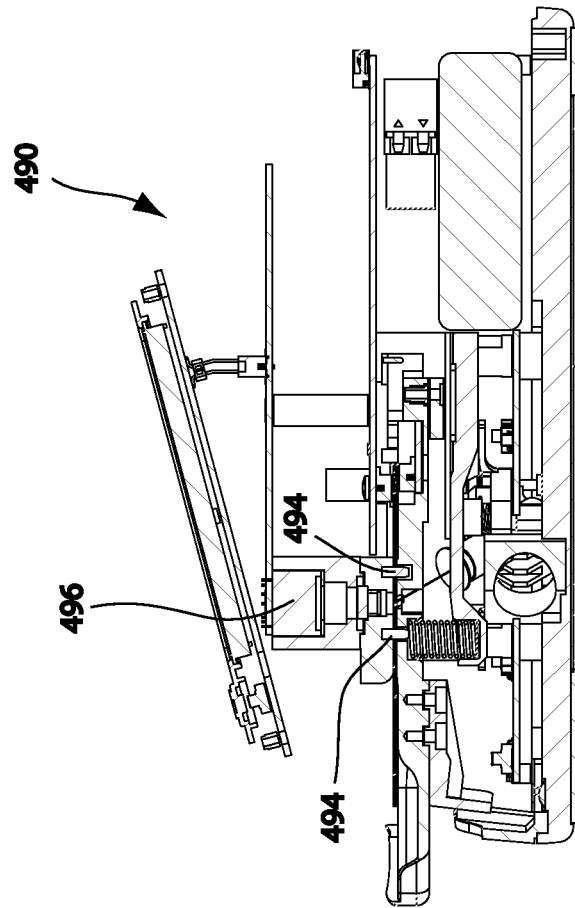


FIG. 31

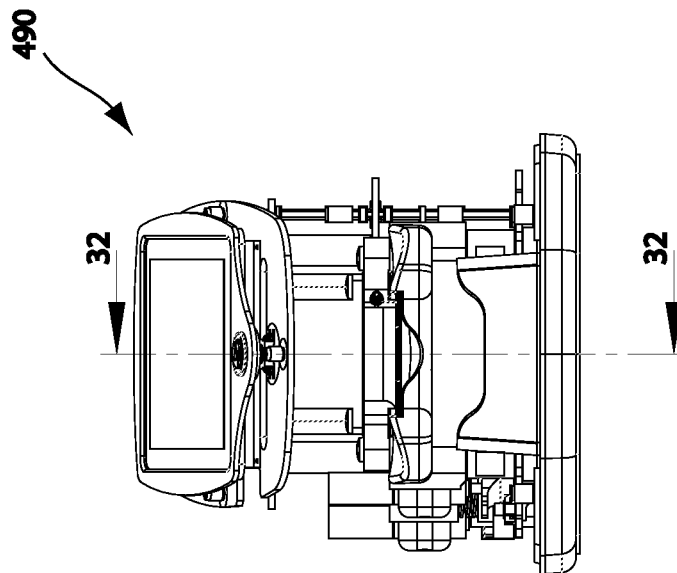


FIG. 32

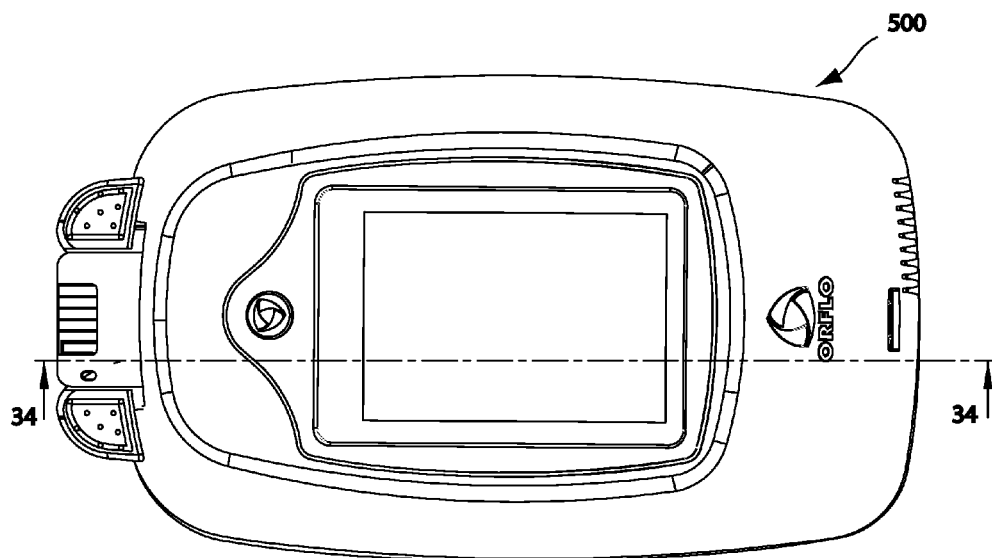


FIG. 33

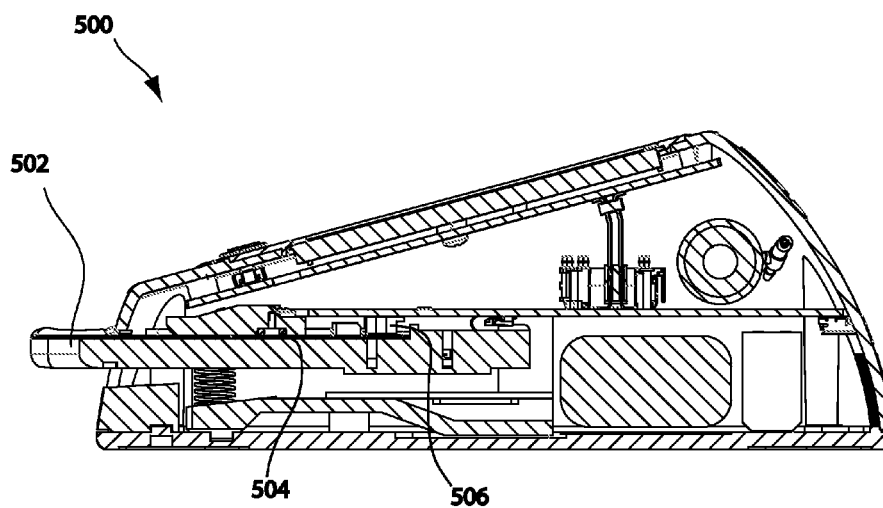


FIG. 34

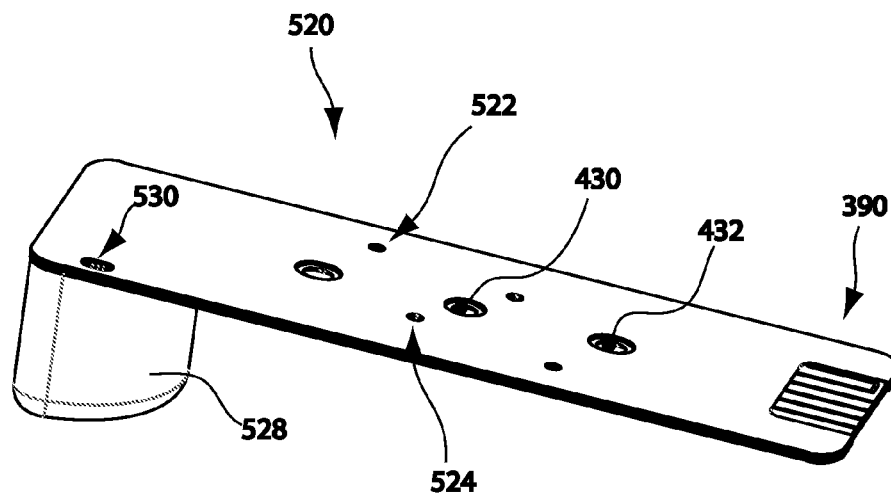


FIG. 35

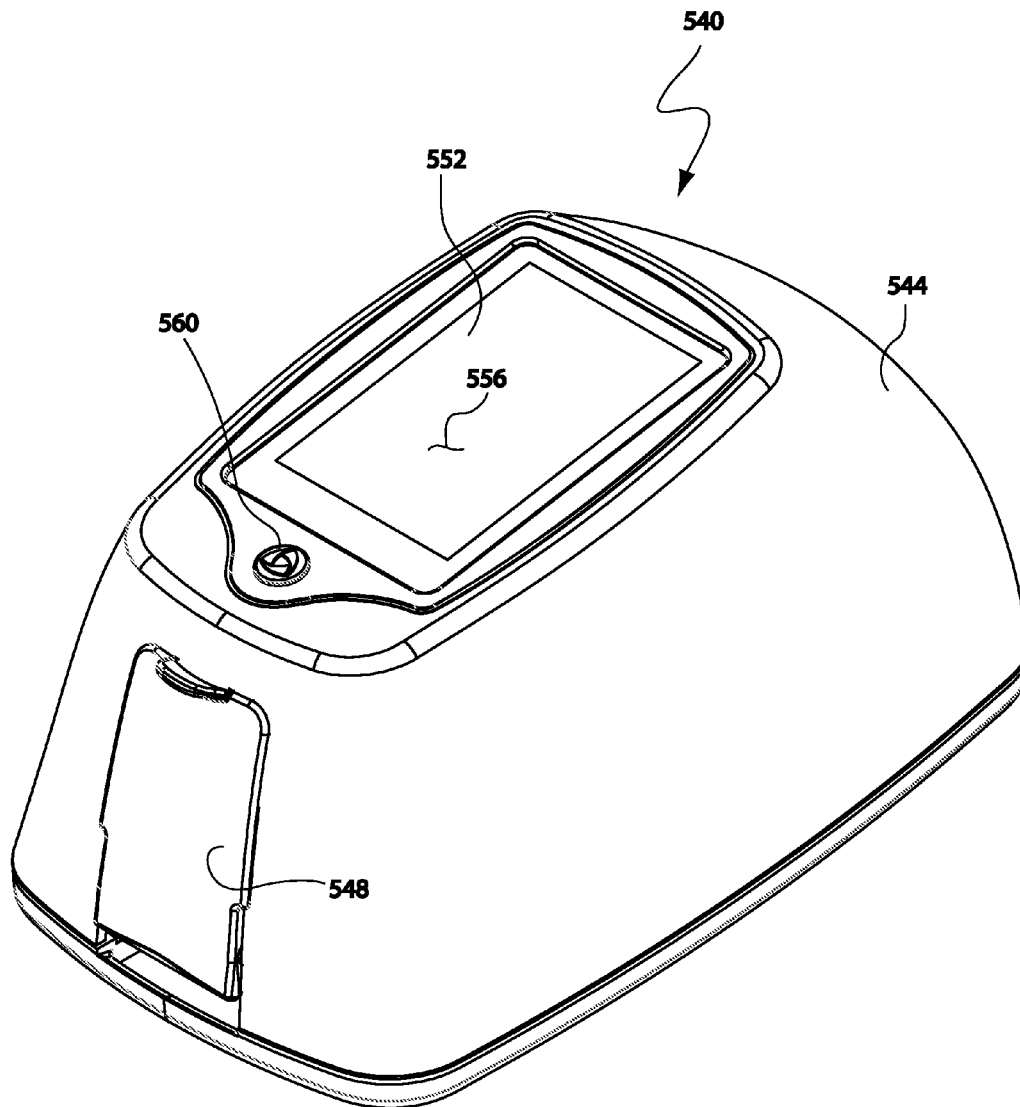


FIG. 36

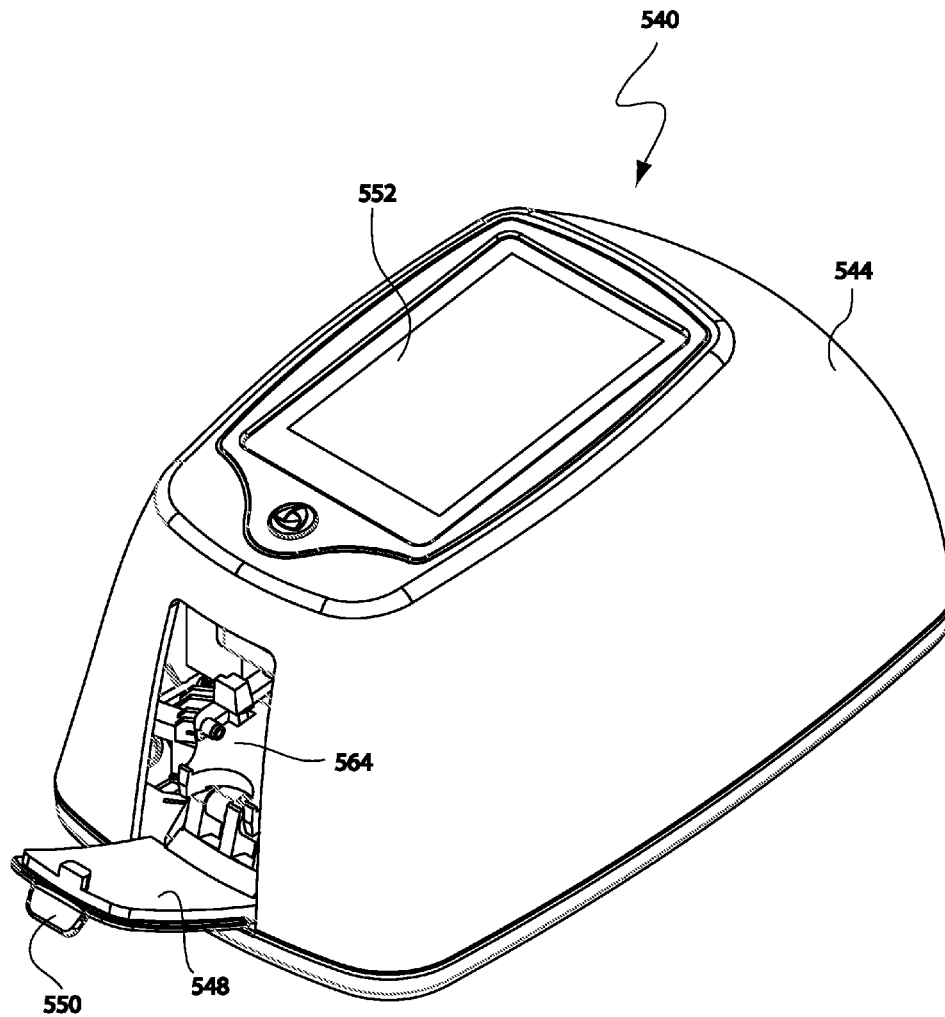


FIG. 37

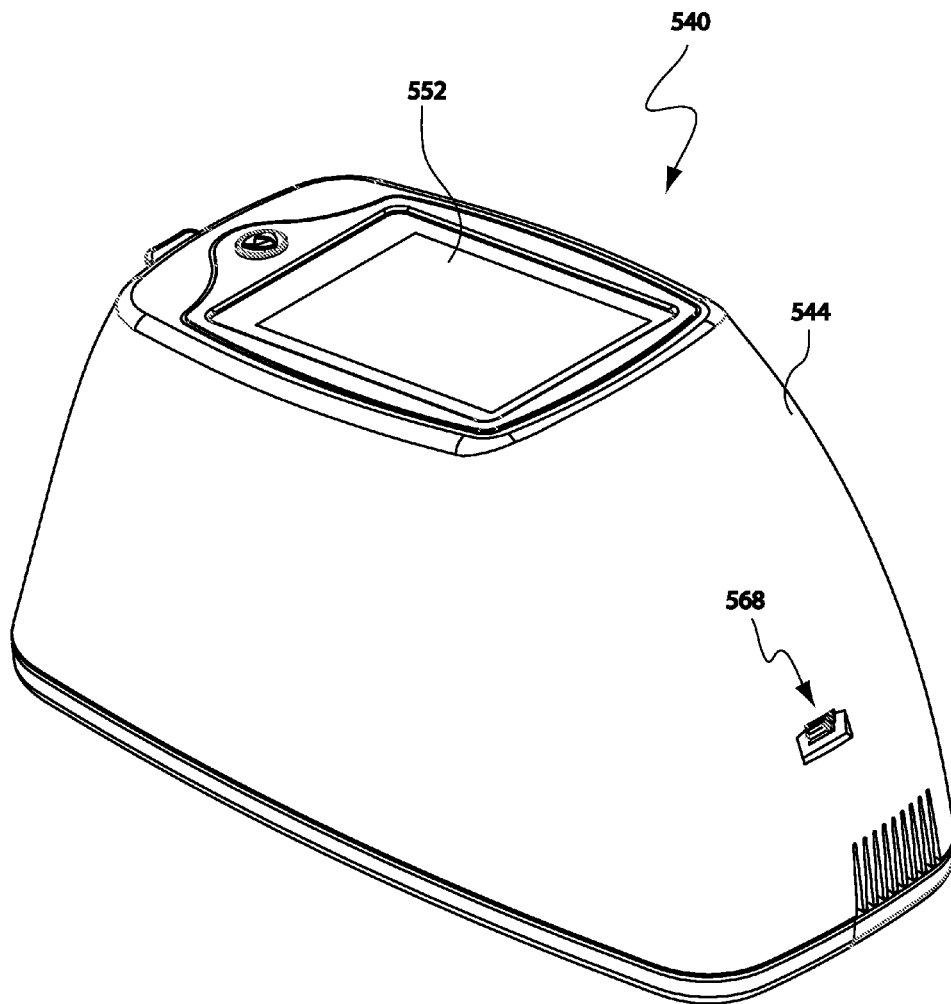


FIG. 38

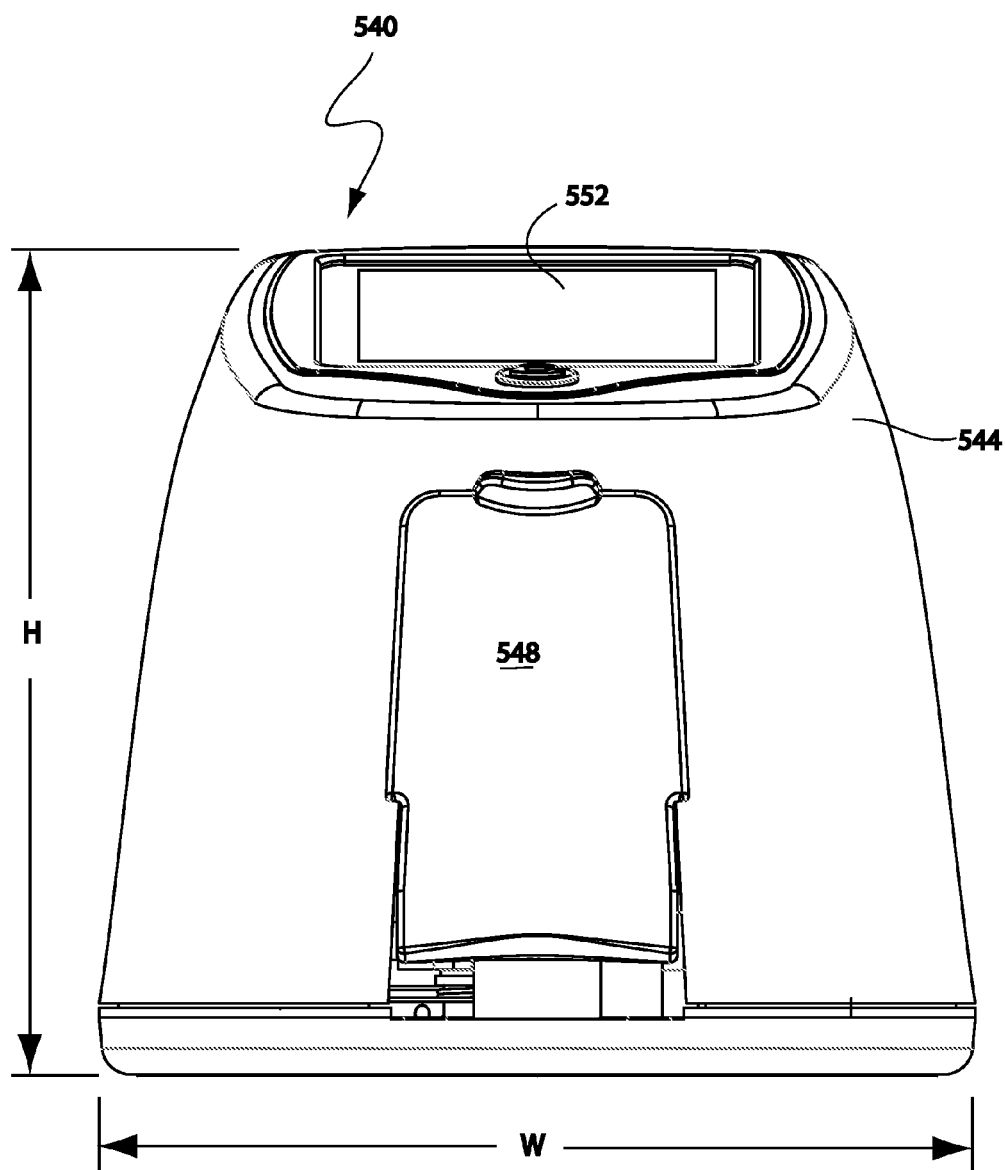


FIG. 39

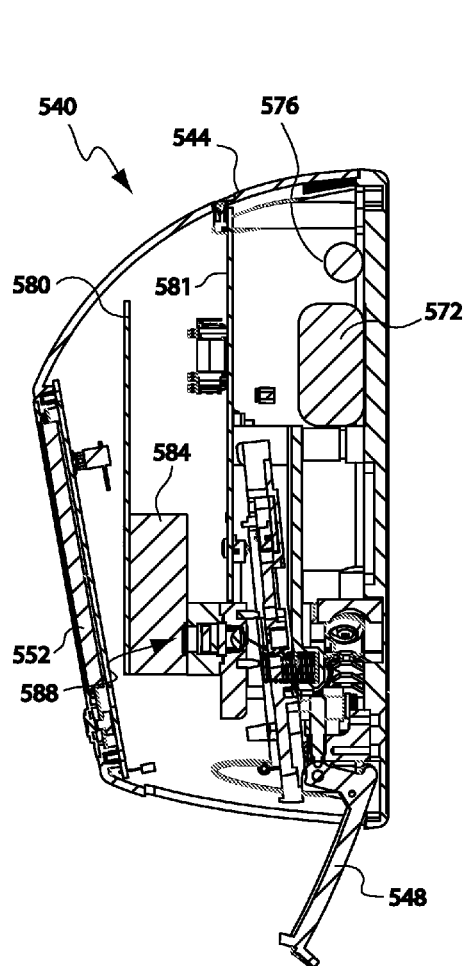


FIG. 41

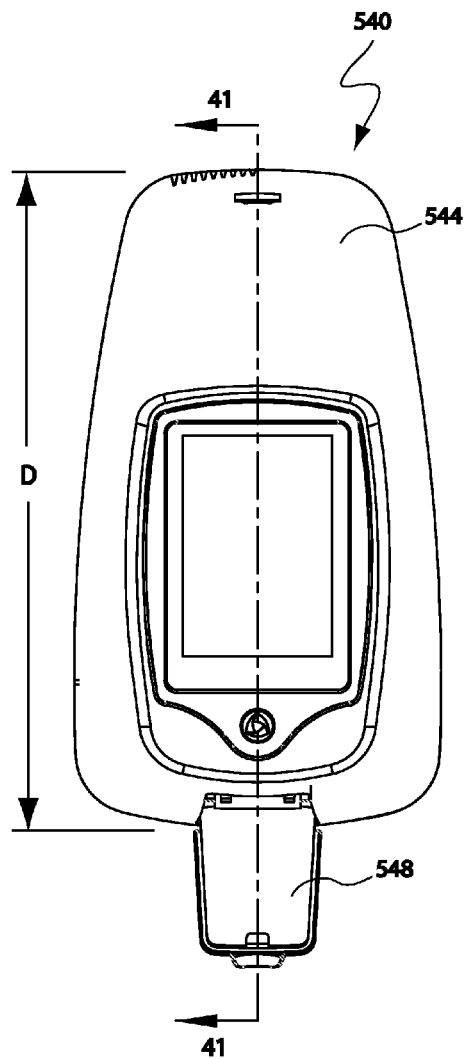


FIG. 40

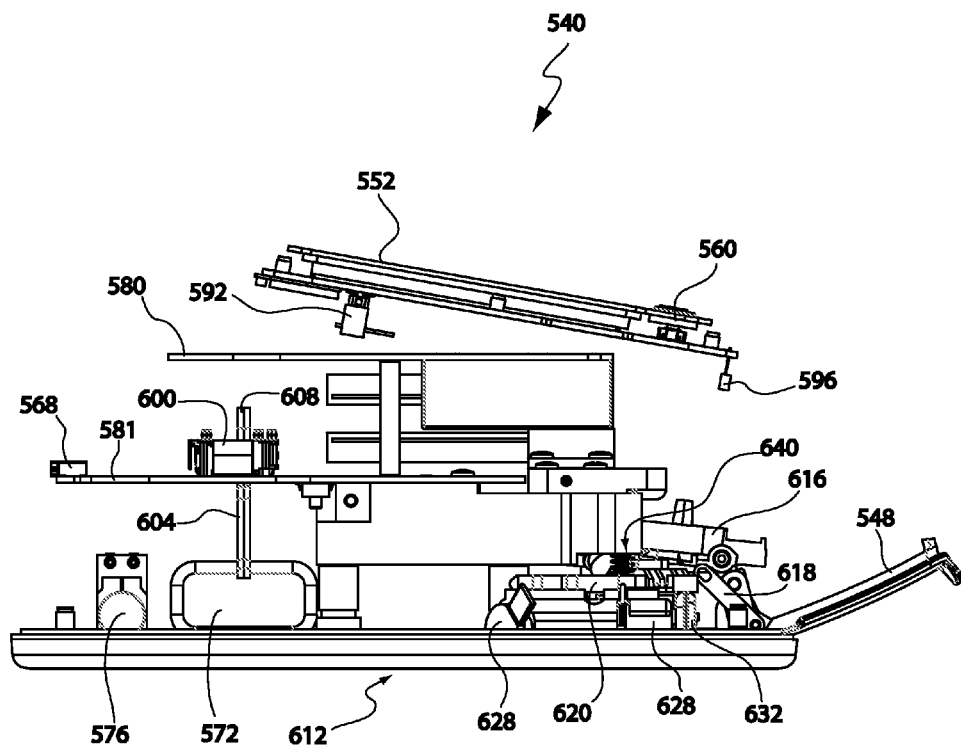


FIG. 42

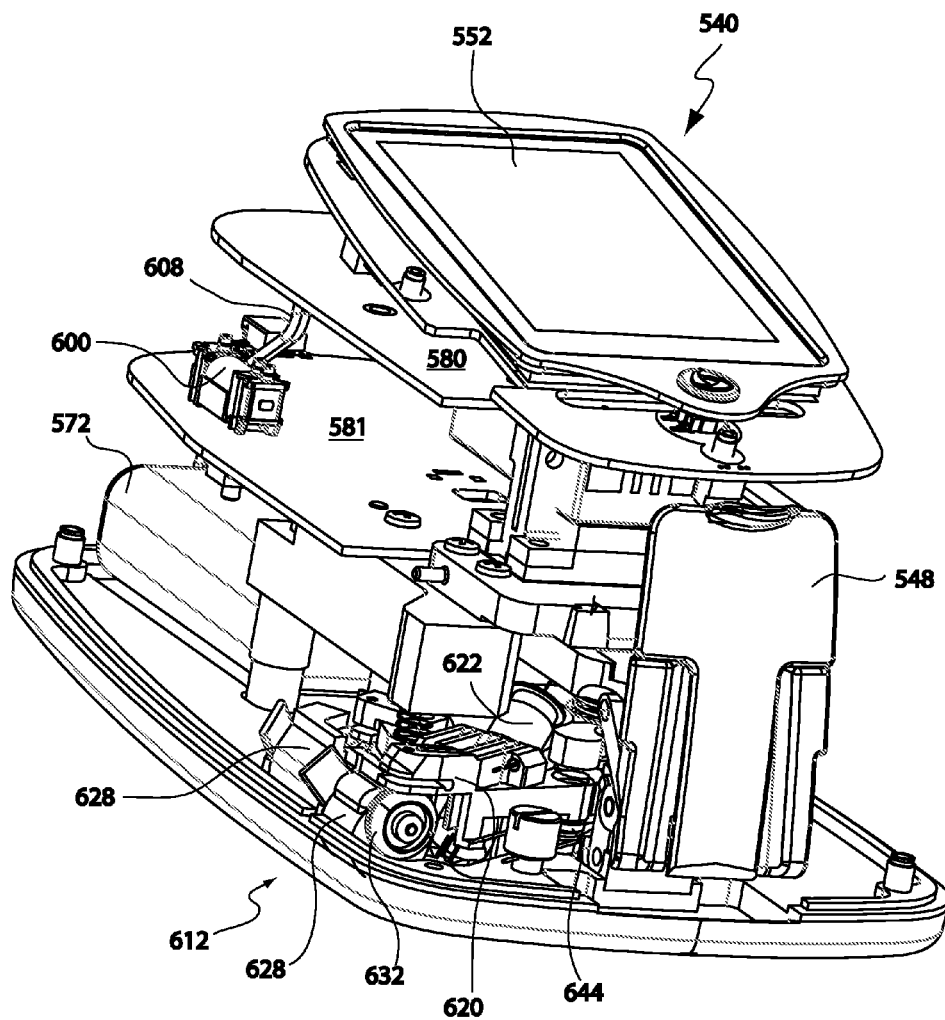


FIG. 43

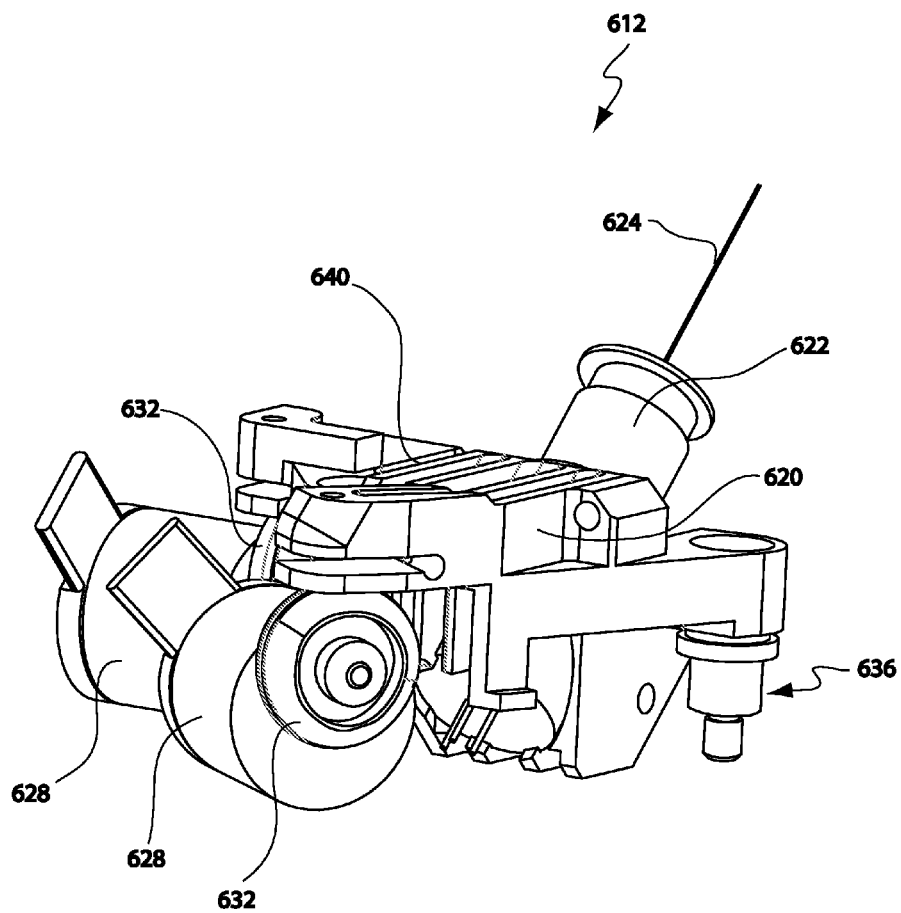


FIG. 44

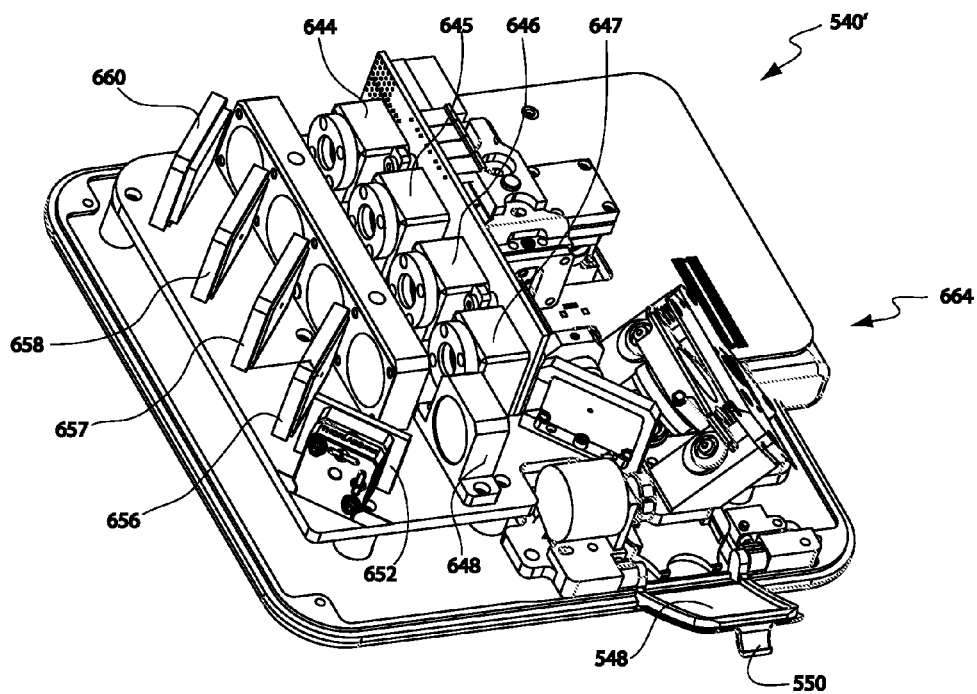
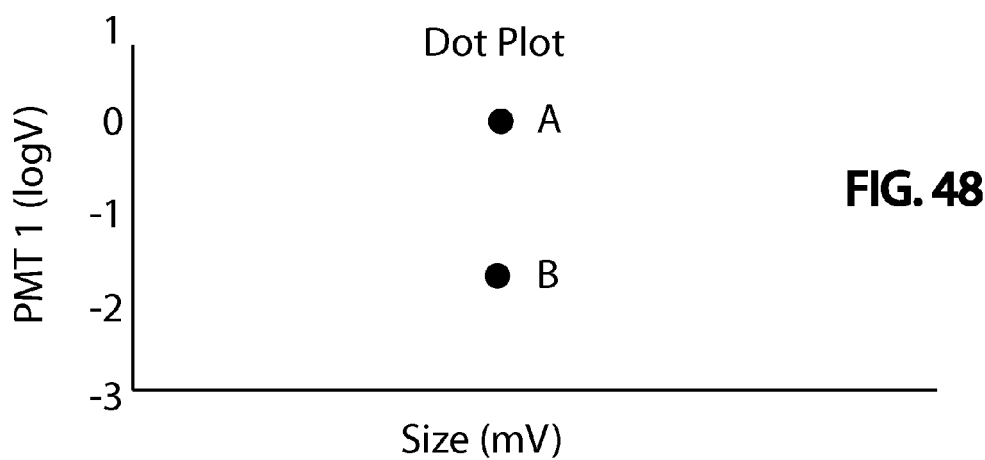
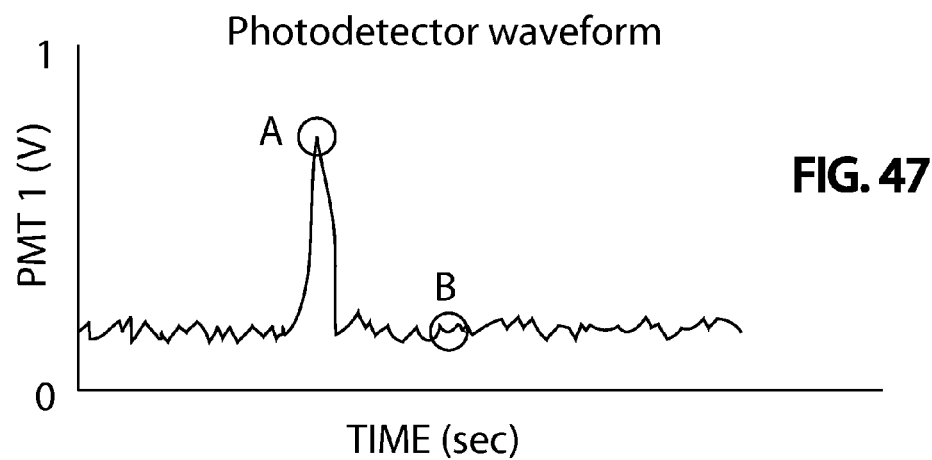
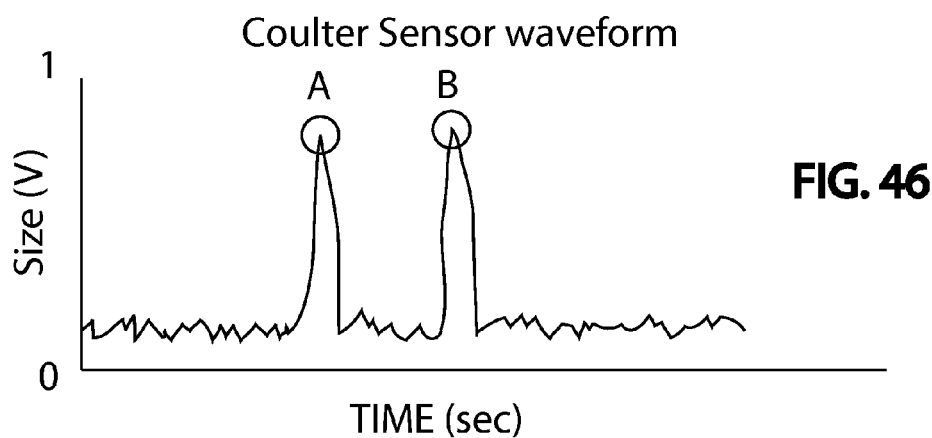
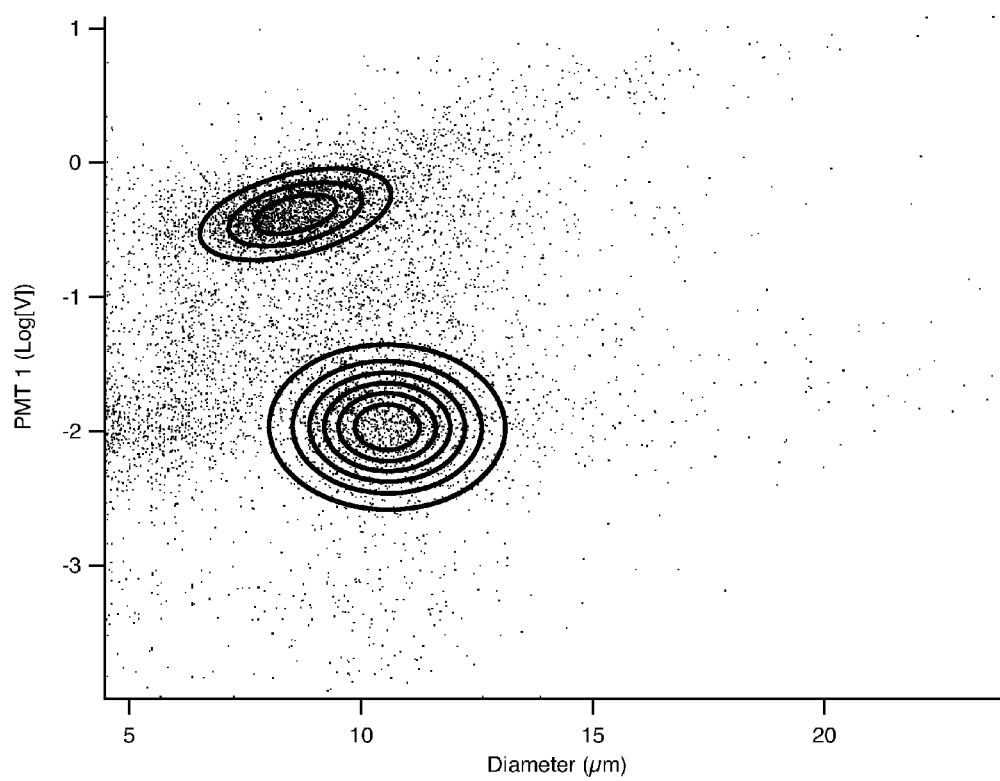


FIG. 45



**FIG. 49**

MICROFLUIDIC INTERROGATION DEVICE

RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation-in-part (CIP) of U.S. utility application Ser. No. 12/985,536, filed Jan. 6, 2011, titled "REUSABLE THIN FILM PARTICLE SENSOR", now U.S. utility Pat. No. 8,614,048, which is a CIP of U.S. utility application Ser. No. 12/381,252, filed Mar. 10, 2009, titled "THIN FILM PARTICLE SENSOR", now U.S. utility Pat. No. 8,171,778, which is a CIP of U.S. utility application Ser. No. 11/800,167, filed May 4, 2007, titled "THIN FILM PARTICLE SENSOR", now U.S. utility Pat. No. 7,520,164, and claims the benefit under 35 U.S.C. 119(e) of the filing date of U.S. Provisional Patent Application (PPA) Ser. No. 60/798,155, filed May 5, 2006, titled "THIN FILM PARTICLE SENSOR", and is a CIP of U.S. utility application Ser. No. 12/378,757, filed Feb. 19, 2009, titled "FLUORESCENCE-ACTIVATED CELL DETECTOR", now U.S. utility Pat. No. 8,072,603, which is a CIP of U.S. utility application Ser. No. 11/701,711, filed Feb. 2, 2007, titled "FLUORESCENCE-ACTIVATED CELL DETECTOR", now U.S. utility Pat. No. 7,515,268, and claims the benefit under 35 U.S.C. 119(e) of the filing date of U.S. PPA Ser. No. 60/764,697, filed Feb. 2, 2006, titled "FLUORESCENCE-ACTIVATED CELL DETECTOR", and is a CIP of the International Patent Application filed on Apr. 7, 2009, under the PCT, Serial No. PCT/US2009/002172, titled "METHOD FOR MANUFACTURING A MICROFLUIDIC SENSOR", now U.S. utility Pat. No. 8,182,635, and claims the benefit under 35 U.S.C. 119(e) of the filing dates of U.S. PPA Ser. No. 61/123,248, filed Apr. 7, 2008 and 61/124,121, filed Apr. 14, 2008, both titled "METHOD FOR MANUFACTURING A MICROFLUIDIC SENSOR", the entire disclosures of which are all hereby incorporated by this reference as though set forth in their entirety herein.

BACKGROUND

1. Field of the Invention

This invention relates generally to electrically-based, and/or optically-based, interrogation devices for use in detecting, quantifying, qualifying, or otherwise sensing, particles carried by a fluid. It is particularly directed to a portable, tabletop, stand-alone interrogation device for use in such particle characterization.

2. State of the Art

Pioneering work in particle detection by measuring impedance deviation caused by particles flowing through a small aperture between two containers of electrically conductive fluid is disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 2,656,508 to W. H. Coulter. Coulter's name is now associated with the principle of particles causing a change in electric impedance as they occlude a portion of the aperture. Since publication of his patent, considerable effort has been devoted to developing and refining sensing devices operating under the Coulter principle. Relevant US patents include U.S. Pat. No. 5,376,878 to Fisher, U.S. Pat. No. 6,703,819 to Gascoyne et al., U.S. Pat. No. 6,437,551 to Krulevitch et al., U.S. Pat. No. 6,426,615 to Mehta, U.S. Pat. No. 6,169,394 to Frazier et al., U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,454,945 and 6,488,896 to Weigl et al., U.S. Pat. No. 6,656,431 to Holl et al., and U.S. Pat. No. 6,794,877 to Blomberg et al. Patent application 2002/117,517 to Unger et al. is also relevant. Each above-referenced document is hereby incorporated by reference, as though set forth herein in their entireties, for their disclosures of relevant technology and structure employed in various sensor arrangements.

Flow cytometry is a well established technique that is used to determine certain physical and chemical properties of microscopic particles by sensing certain optical properties of the particles. Many books and articles are available detailing aspects of this useful investigational tool. For example, operational principles of, and procedures for use of, modern cytometers are set forth in "Practical Flow Cytometry" by Howard M. Shapiro, the contents of which are hereby incorporated by this reference. Flow cytometry is currently used in a wide variety of applications including hematology, immunology, genetics, food science, pharmacology, microbiology, parasitology and oncology.

In flow cytometry, microscopic particles entrained in a carrier fluid are typically arranged in single-file inside a core stream using hydrodynamic focusing (sheath fluid flow). The particles are then individually interrogated by an optical detection system. The interrogation typically includes directing a light beam from a radiation source, such as a laser, transversely across the focused stream of single-file particles. The light beam is scattered by each particle to produce a scatter profile. The scatter profile may be analyzed by measuring the light intensity at both small and larger scatter angles. Certain physical and/or chemical properties of each particle can then be determined from the scatter profile. Currently available flow cytometers are generally large, permanently-installed devices, and can not reasonably be considered to be portable devices.

It is also known to apply fluorescing markers to selected particles of interest prior to processing such particles in a cytometer. For example, particles such as blood cells can be "tagged" with fluorescent molecules by using conjugated monoclonal antibodies. The wavelength of the radiation source (typically a laser), is matched to the excitation wavelength of the fluorescing molecule marker. The tagged particles fluoresce in the cytometer when excited by the transversely oriented laser beam. The fluorescence given off by the excited particle can be detected by an appropriately configured detector, which is conventionally mounted transverse to the path of the particles in the interrogation portion of the cytometer. Therefore, cells tagged with fluorescing markers can be easily detected for counting, or other data manipulation.

Unfortunately, flow cytometers are undesirably complex and expensive pieces of equipment. Care must be taken to ensure the machine is set up correctly, and properly calibrated. It would be an advance to provide a robust, inexpensive apparatus that can be used to promote single-file particle travel through an optically based interrogation zone to promote rapid processing of a plurality of different particle-bearing fluid samples.

While considerable progress has been made in the construction and use of microfluidic interrogation devices incorporating sheathed fluid flow, a need remains for microfluidic interrogation devices that are less expensive, reduced in size to be portable e.g. easily moved between sites of operation, and permit enhanced manipulation of a fluid sample and/or data obtained therefrom. It would be an improvement to provide a sensitive and accurate interrogation device structured to couple with a single-file particle alignment element that is sufficiently robust as to permit its use to serially interrogate a plurality of samples. Desirably, such an improved particle alignment element would be removable from the interrogation device, and even potentially exchanged for a different alignment element having different interrogation capabilities. It would be another improvement to provide an interrogation device structured to permit interrogation of a fluid sample having a pre-defined volume, which can be a sub-set of an

over-size fluid sample that was extracted from a bulk container of fluid and loaded into the interrogation device. Another improvement would provide an interrogation device that can operate as a portable, stand-alone test-and-display station. Still further improvements would provide verification of sample presence at one or more desired position in the device, verify particle sensor functionality (or health) and/or fluid sample integrity, and permit estimation of the flow rate and/or volumetric particle count of an interrogated fluid sample.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

One aspect of this invention provides microfluidic interrogation devices structured sufficiently small in both weight and enclosed volume as to permit a single person, by hand and without tools, to move the entirety of the interrogation device from a first location to a second location. To be portable, interrogation devices typically are structured to weigh less than about 50 pounds, and desirably, to weigh less than about 15 pounds.

Preferred embodiments are structured and arranged as self-contained interrogation devices to permit their stand-alone operation to perform a microfluidic interrogation on a fluid sample, to process resulting microfluidic interrogation data, and to display a corresponding test result without requiring input from a remote computing device. However, interrogation devices according to certain principles of the invention may be structured and arranged to permit coupling to a remote computing device effective to upload data obtained from particle interrogation by the microfluidic interrogation device.

An exemplary interrogation device according to certain principles of the invention includes a bench-top housing and a microprocessor and associated memory that are protected by the housing. An operable housing is sized to fit inside a volume of about 24 inches in height by about 24 inches in width by about 24 inches in depth. A more preferred housing defines a volume that is smaller than defined by a plan form of about 12 inches by about 9 inches and an orthogonal height of about 9 inches. One currently preferred interrogation device is sized about 4½ inches in both maximum width and height, and about 8 inches in maximum depth.

The microprocessor and memory are operably disposable in-circuit with a microfluidic particle detector to receive particle-related data from the particle detector. Preferably, the microprocessor is capable of being programmable to perform a plurality of different particle interrogation and data display tasks. One preferred microprocessor runs under the Linux operating system, although microprocessors operating under other operating systems are also workable.

An operable microfluidic particle detector may be structured to operate under, or detect, either or both of, the Coulter principle and optically-based phenomena. That is, one or more electrical signal may be applied to, and a corresponding electrical property may be detected from, an interrogation zone. Similarly, radiation may be applied to, and corresponding emission or scatter radiation may be detected from, an interrogation zone. An operable particle detector may also include a plurality of optically-based, or electrically-based, sensors or detectors.

In an exemplary embodiment, an interrogation zone may be defined by structure forming non-sheath fluid flow. An operable embodiment may include an interrogation zone that is defined, at least in part, by a portion of a microcapillary lumen. In certain preferred embodiments, an interrogation zone is defined, at least in part, by an aperture disposed to permit fluid flow from a first channel disposed in a first thin

film layer, through the aperture, and into a second channel disposed in a second thin film layer.

One operable microfluidic particle detector includes a laser configured and arranged in operable combination with a heat sink to permit turning the laser on momentarily for purpose of particle interrogation and turning the laser off before it overheats. A workable microfluidic particle detector may include a laser and an adjustable laser mounting mechanism, with the laser mounting mechanism being adjustable responsive to feedback from a sensor (e.g. a photodetector) to permit orienting the laser for impingement of energy emitted by the laser onto a desired location in an interrogation zone.

Interrogation devices according to certain principles of the invention include a microfluidic path that extends through a portion of the housing and is arranged to urge particles carried in a fluid into substantially single-file travel through an interrogation zone. In preferred embodiments, a portion of the microfluidic path is removable from the housing. Sometimes, the microfluidic particle detector includes the removable portion of the microfluidic path. Preferably, the portion of removable microfluidic path is removable in a tool-free operation.

A display device is generally carried by the housing and is disposed operably in-circuit with the microprocessor. A currently preferred display device includes a touch-sensitive surface to receive user input. However, user input may be effected by way of a keyboard and/or mouse, or other known communication device. An operable display device can present a visual image representative of particle interrogation data resulting from microfluidic interrogation performed by the interrogation device. A display device of a currently preferred interrogation device includes a touch-screen disposed in-circuit with the microprocessor and structured to receive input from a user effective to perform a task that may be selected from a plurality of programmed tasks.

Certain embodiments of an interrogation device may include a source of radiation disposed to impinge radiation onto particles in the interrogation zone. In such case, at least a first photodetector is disposed to detect radiation propagating from the interrogation zone, and arranged in-circuit to communicate a signal, corresponding to detected radiation, to the microprocessor.

An interrogation device structured according to certain principles of the invention will generally be capable of illustrating test results soon after performing a test. In certain cases, a microprocessor may be programmed for signal processing that performs peak finding in the raw data by combining raw data from a plurality of optically-based detectors, and displaying a result on the display device. Optionally, a microprocessor can be programmed for signal processing that performs peak finding in the raw data by combining data from one or more electrically-based detector and (typically) from at least one optically-based detector.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the drawings, which illustrate what are currently considered to be the best modes for carrying out the invention:

FIG. 1 is a cross-section schematic of a multi-layer sensor component structured according to certain principles of the instant invention;

FIG. 2 is a top view of an exemplary multi-layer sensor component;

FIG. 3 is an exploded assembly view in perspective from above of the multi-layer sensor component of FIG. 2;

FIG. 4 is an exploded assembly view in perspective from below of the multi-layer sensor component of FIG. 2;

5

FIG. 5 is a bottom view of the multi-layer sensor component of FIG. 2;

FIG. 6 is a view in perspective from above of a sensor component carried by a cartridge;

FIG. 7 is an exploded assembly view in perspective from above of the cartridge of FIG. 6;

FIG. 8 is a top view of the cartridge of FIG. 6;

FIG. 9 is a bottom view of the cartridge of FIG. 6;

FIG. 10 is an end view of the cartridge of FIG. 6;

FIG. 11 is a side view of the cartridge of FIG. 6;

FIG. 12 is a top view of a cartridge in position for its installation into an interrogation device;

FIG. 13 is a cross-section view, taken through section 13-13 in FIG. 12, and looking in the direction of the arrows;

FIG. 14 is a side view of the assembly of FIG. 12;

FIG. 15 is a cartridge-loading end view of the interrogation device of FIG. 12;

FIG. 16 is a schematic of a workable interrogation circuit for use with a sensor such as illustrated in FIG. 6;

FIG. 17 is an X-Y plot representative of certain electrically-based interrogation data obtainable using certain preferred sensor embodiments;

FIG. 18 is a bar chart depicting data related to particle size distribution that may be obtained using certain preferred sensor embodiments;

FIG. 19 is an X-Y plot representative of optically-based interrogation data obtainable using certain preferred sensor embodiments;

FIG. 20A is a schematic of a cross-section taken through an embodiment illustrating general principles of optically-based operation of certain embodiments of the invention;

FIG. 20B is a schematic of an alternative embodiment illustrating general principles of optically-based operation of certain embodiments of the invention;

FIG. 21 is a view in elevation of a currently preferred arrangement for certain structure of an operable interrogation device;

FIG. 22 is a cross-section in elevation, illustrating certain details of a sensor structured as a pipette in association with a portion of an interrogation device;

FIG. 23 is a view in perspective, partially exploded, of an electrically instrumented opaque member portion of a sensor structured as a pipette, with the assembly illustrated in operable association with a radiation source and a detector;

FIG. 24 is a top view of an interrogation layer of a preferred sensor that may be structured as a cassette, or cartridge;

FIG. 25 is a bottom view of the interrogation layer in FIG. 24;

FIG. 26 is a top view of the interrogation layer in FIG. 24, with a channel layer also installed;

FIG. 27 is a bottom view of an interrogation layer similar to that illustrated in FIG. 24, with a channel layer also installed;

FIG. 28 is an exploded view in perspective of a sensor structured as a cassette and including the interrogation layer in FIG. 24;

FIG. 29 is a top view of a workable test arrangement including a vacuum source to urge fluid movement through a sensor;

FIG. 30 is a view in perspective of a currently preferred sensor poised for docking with an interrogation device;

FIG. 31 is an end view in elevation of the interrogation device illustrated in FIG. 30;

FIG. 32 is a cross-section view taken through section 32-32 in FIG. 31 and looking in the direction of the arrows;

FIG. 33 is a top view of an alternative interrogation device

6

FIG. 34 is a cross-section view in elevation taken through section 34-34 in FIG. 33 and looking in the direction of the arrows;

FIG. 35 is a view in perspective of an alternative sensor embodiment adapted for serial processing of a plurality of fluid samples;

FIG. 36 is a perspective view from above, looking at the front of a currently preferred interrogation device;

FIG. 37 is a view similar to that in FIG. 36, but with a door of the device in an open position;

FIG. 38 is a view in perspective from above, looking at the rear of the device in FIG. 36;

FIG. 39 is a front view in elevation of the device in FIG. 36;

FIG. 40 is a top plan view of the device in FIG. 36;

FIG. 41 is a cross-section view taken through section 41-41 in FIG. 40, and looking in the direction of the arrows;

FIG. 42 is a side view in elevation of the device in FIG. 36, with the external cover substantially removed;

FIG. 43 is a front view in perspective of the device in FIG. 42;

FIG. 44 is a view in perspective of a laser-aiming portion of the device in FIG. 43;

FIG. 45 is a view in perspective of an alternative sensor arrangement in an alternative interrogation device structured according to certain principles of the invention; and

FIGS. 46 through 49 are plots of exemplary data obtainable with certain embodiments structured according to certain principles of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE ILLUSTRATED EMBODIMENTS

Reference will now be made to the drawings in which the various elements of the illustrated embodiments will be given numerical designations and in which the invention will be discussed so as to enable one skilled in the art to make and use the invention. It is to be understood that the following description is only exemplary of the principles of the present invention, and should not be viewed as narrowing the claims which follow.

Currently preferred embodiments of the present invention provide stand-alone, reliable, accurate, and relatively low-cost, particle characterization devices. Preferably, a device structured according to certain principles of the invention is sufficiently portable that it may be moved from one location to another location by a single person and without requiring use of tools. Certain interrogation devices may be structured to interface with a removable element that provides a microfluidic fluid channel configured to urge particles carried by a fluid into substantially single-file travel. Sometimes such removable element is disposable, although it is within contemplation to reuse certain such removable channels, e.g. after suitable cleaning. In any case, an interrogation device provided by the instant invention is operable to perform analyses of various sorts on particles that are carried in a fluid.

Examples of analyses in which embodiments of the invention may be used to advantage include, without limitation, counting, characterizing, or detecting members of any cultured cells, and in particular blood cell analyses such as counting red blood cells (RBCs) and/or white blood cells (WBCs), complete blood counts (CBCs), CD4/CD8 white blood cell counting for HIV+ individuals; whole milk analysis; sperm count in semen samples; and generally those analyses involving numerical evaluation or particle size distribution for a particle-bearing fluid (including non-biological). Embodiments of the invention may be used to provide rapid and point-of-care testing, including home market blood diag-

nostic tests. Certain embodiments may be used as an automated laboratory research cell counter to replace manual hemacytometry. It is within contemplation to combine certain embodiments of the instant invention with additional diagnostic elements, such as fluorescence, to permit sophisticated cellular analysis and counting (such as CBC with 5-part WBC differential). It is further contemplated that embodiments of the invention may be adapted to provide a low-cost fluorescence activated cell sorter (FACS), and may be used to determine somatic cell counts in milk for the dairy industry.

For convenience in this disclosure, the invention will generally be described with reference to its use as a particle detector. Such description is not intended to limit the scope of the instant invention in any way. It is recognized that certain embodiments of the invention may be used simply to detect passage of particles, e.g. for counting. Other embodiments may be structured to determine particle characteristics, such as size, or type, thereby permitting discrimination analyses. Furthermore, for convenience, the term "fluid" may be used herein to encompass a fluid mix including a fluid base formed by one or more diluents and particles of one or more types suspended or otherwise distributed in that fluid base. Particles are assumed to have a characteristic "size", which may sometimes be referred to as a diameter, for convenience. Currently preferred embodiments of the invention are adapted to interrogate particles found in whole blood samples, and this disclosure is structured accordingly. However, such is not intended to limit, in any way, the application of the invention to other fluids including fluids with particles having larger or smaller sizes, as compared to blood cells.

In this disclosure, "single-file travel" is defined different than literally according to a dictionary definition. For purpose of this disclosure, substantially single-file travel may be defined as an arrangement of particles sufficiently spread apart and sequentially organized as to permit reasonably accurate detection of particles of interest. In general, we shoot for single particle detection at least about 80% of the time. When two particles are in the interrogation zone at the same, it is called coincidence, and there are ways to mathematically correct for it. Calibration may be performed using solutions having a known particle density (e.g. solutions of latex beads having a characteristic size similar to particle(s) of interest). Also, dilution of the particles in a fluid carrier may contribute to organizing particle travel. As a non-limiting example, it is currently preferred to use sensor devices structured to have sizes disclosed in this document for interrogation of fluid samples having a particle density of approximately between about 3×10^3 to about 3×10^5 cells/ml, where the particle size is on the order of the size of a red blood cell. The Coulter principle (and biology) require a conductive fluid such as 0.9% saline. Solutions can be run that have a particle density (particles/ml) between 1000/ml to 2,000,000/ml.

The term "non-sheath fluid flow" is intended to distinguish over sheath fluid flow to urge particles toward single-file travel. Sheath fluid flow entails dispensing an interior column of fluid into a (generally faster-moving) surrounding "sheath" of fluid to hydrodynamically focus the interior column and thereby urge particles toward single-file travel. The term "non-sheath fluid flow" is defined as encompassing microfluidic fluid flow in e.g. channels spaced apart by an orifice; capillary fluid flow; and other stationary structures; that directly urge particles carried in a fluid toward single-file travel, but not including sheath fluid flow. Therefore, sheath fluid flow to urge particles into single-file travel is expressly outside such definition.

FIG. 1 illustrates certain operational details of a currently preferred sensor component, generally indicated at **100**,

structured according to certain principles of the instant invention. Sensor component **100** is typically used in removable combination with ancillary interrogation structure described below, and operates, at least in-part, to urge single-file travel of particles in a carrier fluid. Sensor components having alternative configurations are within contemplation, including alternative structural arrangements effective to produce substantially single-file travel of particles in a carrier fluid. It is believed that embodiments structured according to certain principles of the instant invention could include a removable sensor component based upon sheathed fluid flow, capillary fluid flow, and/or micro-channel fluid flow.

As illustrated, sensor component **100** includes a sandwich of five layers, which are respectively denoted by numerals **102**, **104**, **106**, **108**, and **110**, from top-to-bottom. A first portion **112** of a conduit to carry fluid through the sensor component **100** is formed in layer **108**. Portion **112** is disposed parallel to, and within, the layers. A second portion **114** of the fluid conduit passes through layer **106**, and may be characterized as a tunnel. A third portion **116** of the fluid conduit is formed in layer **104**. Fluid flow through the conduit is indicated by arrows **118** and **118'**. Fluid flowing through the first and third portions flows in a direction generally parallel to the layers, whereas fluid flowing in the second portion flows generally perpendicular to the layers.

It is within contemplation that two or more of the illustrated layers may be concatenated, or combined. Rather than carving a channel out of a layer, a channel may be formed in a single layer by machining or etching a channel into a single layer, or by embossing, or folding the layer to include a space due to a local 3-dimensional formation of the substantially planar layer. For example, illustrated layers **102** and **104** may be combined in such manner. Similarly, illustrated layers **108** and **110** may be replaced by a single, concatenated, layer.

With continued reference to FIG. 1, middle layer **106** carries a plurality of electrodes arranged to dispose a plurality of electrodes in a 3-dimensional array in space. Sometimes, such electrodes are arranged to permit their electrical communication with electrical surface connectors disposed on a single side of the sandwich, as will be explained further below. As illustrated, fluid flow indicated by arrows **118** and **118'** passes over a pair of electrodes **120**, **122**, respectively. However, in alternative embodiments within contemplation, one or the other of electrodes **120**, **122** may not be present. Typically, structure associated with flow portion **114** is arranged to urge particles, which are carried in a fluid medium, into substantially single-file travel through an interrogation zone. Such an interrogation zone is typically, but not necessarily, associated with one of, or both of, electrodes **120**, **122**. Electrodes **120**, **122** may sometimes be made reference to as interrogation electrodes. In certain applications, an electrical property, such as a current, voltage, resistance, or impedance indicated at V_A and V_B , may be measured between electrodes **120**, **122**, or between one of, or both of, such electrodes and a reference.

Certain embodiments of workable sensor components, such as illustrated sensor component **100**, may employ an electrical stimulation signal based upon driving a desired current through an electrolytic fluid conductor. In such case, it can be advantageous to make certain fluid flow channel portions approximately as wide as possible, while still achieving complete wet-out of the stimulated electrodes. Such channel width is helpful because it allows for larger surface area of the stimulated electrodes, and lowers total circuit impedance and improves signal to noise ratios. Exemplary embodiments used to interrogate blood samples include

channel portions that are about 0.10" wide and about 0.003" to about 0.005" high, or so, in the vicinity of the stimulated electrodes.

One design consideration concerns wettability of the electrodes. At some aspect ratio of channel height to width, the electrodes MAY not fully wet in some areas, leading to unstable electrical signals and increased noise. To a certain point, higher channels help reduce impedance and improve wettability. Desirably, especially in the case of interrogation electrodes, side-to-side wetting essentially occurs by the time the fluid front reaches the second end of the electrode along the channel axis. Of course, wetting agents may also be added to a fluid sample, to achieve additional wetting capability. The desire is to obtain fully wetted electrodes. The ratio of channel height to width is one design driver. It has been determined safe to not go wider than about 0.16" in channel width for a channel layer thickness of 0.010" (channel height). Wider than that, consistency of electrode wet-out drops off.

Still with reference to FIG. 1, note that electrodes 120 and 122 are illustrated in an arrangement that promotes complete wet-out of each respective electrode independent of fluid flow through the tunnel forming flow portion 114. That is, in certain preferred embodiments, the entire length of an electrode is disposed either upstream or downstream of the tunnel forming flow portion 114. In such case, the "length" of the electrode is defined with respect to an axis of flow along a portion of the conduit in which the electrode resides. The result of such an arrangement is that the electrode is at least substantially fully wetted independent of tunnel flow, and will therefore provide a stable, repeatable, and high-fidelity signal with reduced noise. In contrast, an electrode having a tunnel passing through itself may provide an unstable signal as the wetted area changes over time. Also, one or more bubble may be trapped in a dead-end, or eddy-area disposed near the tunnel (essentially avoiding downstream fluid flow), thereby variably reducing the wetted surface area of a tunnel-penetrated electrode, and potentially introducing undesired noise in a data signal.

In general, disposing the electrodes 120 and 122 closer to the tunnel portion 114 is better (e.g., gives lower solution impedance contribution), but the system would also work with such electrodes being disposed fairly far away. Similarly, a stimulation signal (such as electrical current) could be delivered using alternatively structured electrodes, even such as a wire placed in the fluid channel at some distance from the interrogation zone. The current may be delivered from fairly far away, but the trade off is that at some distance, the electrically restrictive nature of the extended channel will begin to deteriorate the signal to noise ratios (as total cell sensing zone impedance increases).

With continued reference to FIG. 1, electrode 124 is disposed for contact with fluid in conduit flow portion 112. Electrode 126 is disposed for contact with fluid in flow portion 116. It is currently preferred for electrodes 124, 126 to also be carried on a surface of interrogation layer 106, although other configurations are also workable. Note that an interrogation layer, such as an alternative to illustrated single layer 106, may be made up from a plurality of sub-component layers. In general, electrodes 124, 126 are disposed on opposite sides of the interrogation zone, and may sometimes be made reference to as stimulated electrodes. In certain applications, a signal generator 128 is placed into electrical communication with electrodes 124 and 126 to input a known stimulus to the sensor 100. However, it is within contemplation for one or both of electrodes 124, 126 to not be present in alternative operable sensors structured according to certain principles of the instant invention. In alternative configura-

tions, any electrode in the sensor 100 may be used as either a stimulated electrode or interrogation electrode.

One currently preferred sensor component, generally indicated at 130, will now be described with reference to FIGS. 2-5. Sensor 130 includes five thin film layers that are stacked to form a thin film sandwich, similar to the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1. FIG. 2 is a top view of sensor component 130, and shows how the top cap layer 102 and top channel layer (e.g. 104, FIG. 3) form a window arranged to permit access to a portion of interrogation layer 106. In the illustrated embodiment, the exposed portion includes an edge of layer 106. The exposed surface of the edge of interrogation layer 106 carries a plurality of conductors (134 through 146, respectively) that are configured to form an electrical interface to interrogation circuitry. That is, a portion of each of conductors 134-146 is desirably exposed to form a plurality of surface connectors of an electrically communicating interface. One operable such interface may be formed in harmony with a commercially available multi-pin electrical connector, such as part No. SIB-110-02-F-S-LC, available from Samtec having a place of business located in New Albany, Ind. Other workable connector structure includes touch-down probes, and other electrically-conductive, contact-forming probes known in the art.

Also shown in FIG. 2 are alignment holes 148 and 150, respectively. Because top layer 102 is illustrated as being transparent (although such is not required in all cases for practice of the invention), electrode 126 disposed in channel portion 116 is visible. Similarly, fluid via 152 may be seen. As will be detailed further below, via 152 passes through interrogation layer 106, and permits fluid flow downwardly through the thickness of the sensor component 130. Electrode 122 is also visible, disposed in association with the interrogation zone, generally indicated at 154.

With particular reference now to FIGS. 3 and 4, a pair of fluid vias pass through bottom cap layer 110. Via 156 is a fluid entrance via, through which sample fluid enters the sensor component 130 for continued flow through channel portion 112, as indicated by fluid flow direction arrow 158. Channel portion 112 is disposed in layer 108 and introduces fluid into the interrogation zone 154 (or tunnel-like channel portion 114 in FIG. 1). Downstream from the interrogation zone 154, fluid flows through channel portion 116 as indicated by fluid flow direction arrow 158'. Channel portion 116 is disposed in layer 104 and communicates to via 152 passing through layer 106. Fluid via 152 communicates fluid into channel portion 160 disposed in layer 108. Fluid via 162 is a fluid exit via, through which fluid flowing through channel portion 160 may leave the sensor component 130. A direction of fluid flow in channel 160 is indicated by arrow 158".

As best seen with reference to FIGS. 4 and 5, certain embodiments of a thin film sensor component 130 may include one or more additional and optional electrodes. Layers 102 and 104 are illustrated as being transparent, although such is not required for practice of the invention. As illustrated, electrodes 164, 166, and 168 are disposed on layer 106 and are arranged for contact with fluid carried in channel portion 160. Electrode 164 is in electrical communication with conductor 146; electrode 166 is in electrical communication with conductor 142; and electrode 168 is in electrical communication with conductor 140. Such optional electrodes may be used, for examples, to verify the presence of sample fluid at one or more known locations in sensor 130, to estimate the rate of fluid flow through the sensor, and/or as start or stop triggers for an activity such as data acquisition.

It should be noted that certain electrodes carried by sensor component 130 (e.g. 120, 124, 164-168), are in electrical

11

communication with their respective conductor that is disposed on an opposite side of layer **106** by way of a conductive path disposed through a respective electrical via **170** (see FIG. 3). Such conductive path is conveniently formed during a laminating or metallizing step during manufacture of the sensor component. In any case, it should be appreciated that a complex pattern of electrodes can be disposed to interrogate fluid in 3-dimensional space, even in the illustrated case where the electrodes are carried by a single metallized layer.

The conductive elements forming conductors (e.g. **134-146**) and/or electrodes (e.g. **120-126**) must simply conduct electricity, and can include one or more metal, such as Copper, Silver, Platinum, Iridium, Chromium, and Gold, or alloys, or multiple layers of metals or alloys. The vias **170** permit conduction of electricity from top to bottom through spacer layer **106**, and enable surface conductors to be disposed on only one side of the spacer layer, for convenient interface with a commercially available electrode interface (i.e. connector). Of course, it is realized that certain interface probe-electrodes of an interrogation device may be structured to avoid vias on the sensor, e.g. that surface electrodes can be provided on both sides of the spacer layer, in alternative sensor constructions.

An electrical property at an electrode may be monitored to determine arrival of fluid at that electrode. For example, the impedance measured at an electrode undergoes a significant change in value as the wave-front, or the leading edge, an electrolyte fluid passes over the electrode. In one currently preferred use of the sensor component **130** (see FIG. 4), a stimulus electric signal (such as a 1 kHz square wave) is applied to electrode **164**. A sudden change in the impedance values measured at electrodes **166** and **168** indicates the successive arrivals of the wave-front of the sample fluid at each respective electrode. In the illustrated embodiment **130**, first verification of fluid at electrode **166** ensures that sample fluid is in place for interrogation, and a test run can begin. Feedback from electrode **166** may therefore serve as a first trigger to begin interrogation of the fluid sample.

A change in impedance at electrode **168** indicates the wave-front has reached that electrode as well. A time differential between the impedance changes at electrodes **166** and **168** can be used, in harmony with a known volume therebetween, to estimate a fluid flow rate through the sensor component **130**. The volume between electrodes **166** and **168** may be calculated by integrating the function of the cross-section area of channel portion **160** along the length **L1** of such channel portion disposed between those electrodes. It is currently preferred to simplify such calculation by holding both the cross-section and depth of channel portion **160** constant between electrodes.

Electrodes, such as **166** and **168**, may be disposed as first and second triggers operable to indicate respective start and stop signals based upon detection of a fluid boundary. The first and second triggers can be located to have locations of effective operation that are disposed spaced apart by a lumen defining a known volume. Such triggers may be used, for non-limiting example, to start and stop data acquisition for a sample having a known volume. It is preferred for cooperating trigger electrodes to have substantially the same conformation (e.g. wetted area and axial length), to promote consistent electrical response of each subsequent downstream trigger. Sometimes, the channel may be narrowed in the vicinity of an electrode to reduce possible variations in the shape of the fluid front as it makes contact with the electrode.

A sensor component **130** may be formed from a plurality of stacked and bonded layers of thin film, such as a polymer film. In an exemplary sensor component **130** used in connection

12

with interrogation of blood cells, it is currently preferred to form top and bottom layers **102** and **110** from Polyamide or Mylar film. A workable range in thickness for Polyamide layers is believed to be about 0.1 micron to about 500 microns. A currently preferred Polyamide layer **102**, **110** is about 52 microns in thickness for a sensor component used to interrogate particles in blood. It is further within contemplation that a pair of top and/or bottom layers can be formed from a single layer including fluid channel structure formed e.g. by etching, molding, or hot embossing.

It is currently preferred to make the spacer layer **106** from Polyamide also. However, alternative materials, such as Polyester film or Kapton, which is less expensive, are also workable. A film thickness of about 52 microns for spacer layer **106** has been found to be workable in a sensor used to interrogate blood cells. Desirably, the thickness of the spacer layer is approximately on the order of the particle size of the dominant particle to be interrogated. A workable range is currently believed to be within about 1 particle size, to about 15 times particle size, or so.

Vias **170** are typically formed in the layer **106** prior to dual-sided deposition of the conductive elements onto such layer, although alternative manufacturing techniques are workable. Alignment apertures **148**, **150** and via **152** may be formed at the same time as vias **170**, or subsequent to the metallizing step. Such void elements, and channel portions, may be formed by cutting through the respective layer with a laser, water jet, die stamping, drilling, or by some other machining technique. Deposition of conductive film elements to layer **106** may be effected using well-known metal-deposition techniques, including lamination. Metal sheets may be laminated to a polymer layer using thin adhesive. Double clad sheets formed in such manner are commercially available, and can be patterned as desired to form electrodes. It is believed that workable sensors can be made having test electrodes that are 0.5 microns in thickness, or perhaps even less. Electrodes for use in currently preferred blood cell sensors may be up to about 36 microns in thickness. Sometimes, a pair of metals, such as Cu or Cr and Au may be deposited in the current process. The Cu or Cr layer may be thin, typically goes on first, and acts as a bonding layer between the polymer film and the Au. It is currently preferred to configure the electrodes and conductive elements by wet etching subsequent to deposition of the electrically conductive material.

Impedance at the electrode/electrolyte interface is proportional to wetted electrode surface. Electrodes may be configured having a desired useful size of surface area disposed for contact with fluid in a channel. It is currently preferred to apply a stimulation signal to stimulated electrodes to cause at least about 0.1 mA RMS current flow through the interrogation zone. The currently preferred signal is at 100 kHz, although signals at lower frequency or higher frequencies, such as 200 k Hz, or more, are operable. The surface area of the stimulated electrodes are sized to accommodate a desired current flow and signal frequency. It is currently believed that electrodes should be sized to have a current density of less than about 5 mA/cm².

In one embodiment of sensor component **130** adapted to impart a constant 1 mA RMS current stimulation at about 100 kHz, interrogation electrodes **120**, **122** have a wetted surface area of about 0.036 cm², and stimulated electrodes **124**, **126** have a wetted surface area of about 0.45 cm². In such case, it is thought that the stimulated electrodes **124**, **126** could be reduced in size to about 1/5 cm², or less, without suffering a lack of performance due to degradation of the electrode during such stimulation.

13

The channel portion **114** is typically laser drilled through layer **106** (and any electrodes carried thereon that are also disposed in the fluid path). A diameter of 35 microns for channel **114** is currently preferred in certain preferred embodiments to urge blood cells toward single-file travel through the interrogation zone **154**. Other cross-section shapes, other than circular, can also be formed during construction of channel **114**. Naturally, the characteristic size of the orifice formed by drilling channel **114** will be dependent upon the characteristic size of the particles to be characterized or interrogated. Counter-boring can be performed on thicker layers to reduce the "effective thickness" of the sensing zone.

Alignment holes **148**, **150** passing through each layer may be used to align the various layers using guide pins during assembly of the plurality of layers. A double-sided adhesive polymer film is currently preferred as a material of composition for combination bonding-channel layers **104** and **108**. Layers **104** and **108** in a currently preferred sensor **130** are made from double-sided Polyamide (PET) tape having a thickness of about 0.0032 inches. Alternatively, a plain film layer may be laminated to an adjacent plain layer using heat and pressure, or adhesively bonded using an interposed adhesive, such as acrylic or silicone adhesive.

A currently preferred embodiment structured according to certain principles of the instant invention is generally indicated at **180** in FIG. 6, and may sometimes be characterized as a cartridge or cassette. Cartridge **180** includes a base **182** on which to hold a sensor component, such as some sort of thin film sensor component, generally **183**, or other plumbing arrangement effective to urge suitable particle alignment for interrogation. A workable base may be formed by injection molding a plastic, or plastic-like, material. It is preferred to configure base **182** having a small size to reduce a required volume of constituent material, but still form a cartridge **180** that is sufficiently large to facilitate its handling and manipulation under control of a human hand.

With reference now to FIG. 7, base element **182** includes alignment holes **184**, **186**, and **188**, which also extend to pass through channel layer **190**, cap layer **192**, and adhesive layer **194**. Holes **184** and **186** are configured and arranged to cooperate with alignment holes **148** and **150**, respectively, to permit component alignment using pin elements of a common fixture during assembly of the cartridge **180**. Base element **182** also holds sample receiving chamber **196**, and processed fluid chamber **198**. Vent aperture **200** is in fluid communication through base **182** with vent connection access port **202**. Similarly, vacuum aperture **204** is in fluid communication through base **182** with vacuum connector access port **206**.

Channel layer **190** may be formed from a thin film of polymer film, similar to layers **104**, **108** of the sensor **130**. Preferably, layer **190** is made from a two-sided adhesive tape, such as Polyamide tape. Layer **190** includes cut-out area shaped to form additional void elements, including channel **208**, a portion of which augments a volume provided by chamber **196** in which to receive a fluid sample. Transverse portion **210** of channel **208** communicates to vent aperture **200**, effective to permit escape of air from chamber **196** during infusion of a sample for interrogation.

Continuing to refer to FIG. 7, aperture **212** extends as a fluid-flow channel or via through layers **190**, **192** and **194** effective to introduce fluid received from chamber **196** into sensor component **183**. An optionally enlarged portion of channel **212** permits fluid to spread out over a sufficiently large filter area prior to passing through optional filter element **214** and entering sensor element **183**. It typically is desirable to include a filter element **214** to resist entrance into the interior of sensor component **183** of clots or debris that

14

might plug channel portion **114**. A preferred filter element **214** resists passage of particles larger than those approaching the characteristic size of the interrogation zone **154**. A workable filter **214** includes a Nylon Net Filter NY30 available from Millipore Cat: NY3004700, which has filtering pores that are about 30 microns in size. Desirably, the filter essentially consists of openings having a characteristic size that is smaller than a characteristic size of a minimum cross-section of the interrogation zone.

Still with reference to FIG. 7, layer **190** also includes vacuum channel **216**, which communicates at end **218** with vacuum aperture **204**. As will be discussed in more detail below, fluid may be transported through certain conduits of sensor **180** using a vacuum source that may be connected to port **206**. It is recognized that fluid flow may be urged in alternative ways, including positively pressurized fluid flow, and capillary attraction, as non-limiting examples.

In certain preferred embodiments, a barrier element **220** is disposed in association with aperture **222** passing through layer **190**. A workable barrier element **220** permits escape of air from chamber **198**, but resists escape of fluid from such chamber. A preferred barrier **220** includes a PTFE gasket, such as a 0.2 micron pore size Fluoropore, FGLP, which can be purchased from Millipore Cat. No. FGLP01300. Gasket **220** is illustrated in FIG. 7 as being installed in a preferred blocking position on the bottom of layer **190**, but may be disposed in a blocking position on either side of layer **190**. Barrier **220** is an exemplary embodiment of flow termination structure disposed downstream from the interrogation zone and arranged to resist flow of fluid beyond a boundary associated with the microfluidic sensor. Other operable flow termination structure includes porous materials that turn to gels when wet; hydrophobic porous membranes or plugs; and very small laser drilled holes in films (e.g. <10 microns).

Continuing to refer to FIG. 7, an exemplary layer **192** may be made from polymer film, and functions as a cap layer, similar to layer **110** of sensor component **183**. An embossed portion **224** is formed in layer **192** to create a simple channel structure through which air can communicate between end **226** of vacuum channel **216** and aperture **222**. The vacuum-side fluid conduit communicating between port **206** and a sensor exit (such as exit via **162** of sensor **130**), is completed by way of aperture **228**, which forms a fluid conduit or via extending from end **230** of chamber **198**, through layers **190**, **192**, and **194**, for communication with a fluid exit via of an installed thin film sensor component **183**.

In one use of the device, a micro-pipette tip may be inserted for fluid-tight reception into sample-receiving aperture or port **230**. A raw fluid sample can then be infused from the micro-pipette into chamber **196**, while air is permitted to escape through channel **210** and vent port **202**. The size for a raw fluid sample for characterization of blood cells in one representative device is 50 μ l, although the sensor conduits and chambers may be sized to accommodate samples having an alternative desired size. Vent port **202** is then occluded, either manually or using an automated structure. A vacuum source is then applied to port **206** to promote fluid flow from holding chamber **196**, through channel **208**, aperture **212**, optional filter **214**, and into a fluid entrance of the sensor component.

After flowing through the sensor component, fluid is drawn through aperture **228** and into holding chamber **198**. Once chamber **198** is filled, fluid is barred from further flow by barrier element **220**, which is one example of operable flow termination structure that resists additional flow. The volume of fluid encompassed by chamber **198** can help to determine a known volume for processed fluid. In the representative

15

device, the processed fluid volume, defined by chamber **198** in combination with a small upstream volume contained in conduit structure stretching to a fluid-front presence verification structure, such as electrode **166** (see FIG. 4), is 25 μ l.

Additional details of construction of an exemplary cartridge **180** are illustrated in FIGS. 8-11. Notably, ramp structure **232**, best seen in FIGS. 9 and 10, can be helpful to assist in coupling the cartridge with certain interrogation devices. Other structure associated with the base **182**, such as alignment holes **186** and **188**, may also be employed to assist in coupling a cartridge with an interrogation device.

An interrogation device desirably provides three functions; 1) apparatus configured in harmony with the sensor (or cartridge, cassette, etc.) effective to detect particles of interest, 2) fluid-flow control, and 3) alignment. A workable interrogation device is indicated generally at **240** in FIGS. 12-15.

A cartridge **242** is illustrated in position for its insertion in registration with socket **244** (see FIG. 13). As the cartridge is inserted into the socket **244**, ramps **232** on the bottom side of the cartridge body press the two alignment pins **246** down. The cartridge **242** then comes into contact with the vent and vacuum connectors, **248** and **250**, respectively.

In the illustrated interrogation device **240**, the vent connector **248** and vacuum connector **250** are made from silicone rubber tubing. The rubber tubes mate with respective connection ports (e.g. **202** and **206**, see FIG. 10) to form an airtight seal. The silicone rubber tubing is supported on the inside by a smaller, more rigid piece of tubing. The rigid, internal tubing imparts the required mechanical stability while the soft, flexible rubber tubing conforms to make an airtight seal. This airtight seal is actually made because the rubber tube extends sufficiently to contact the bottom of the cartridge mating hole before the cartridge is fully seated. When the cartridge is inserted slightly further into the interrogation device, the rubber tube is forced to expand radially outward, thereby making an airtight seal against its receiving socket (e.g. **202** or **206**).

When seated in socket **244**, the electrical contact pads (on the top of the cartridge and generally indicated at **252** in FIG. 12) contact biased pins **254** of the electrical connector **256**. The electrical connector **256** places the sensor **242** in electrical communication with test circuitry **257** that is typically carried by an interrogation device and is adapted to interrogate particles passing through the sensor.

When the cartridge **242** is fully inserted, the alignment pins **246** seat inside the alignment holes **184**, **186** in the bottom of the cartridge via force imparted by springs **258**. The cartridge is now fully engaged, aligned, and ready for testing. To remove a cartridge, the release latch **260** is pressed downward, thereby retracting the alignment pins **246** from the cartridge body as the latch rotates about pivot axle **262**. The cartridge can then be easily pulled out of the interrogation device in a tool-free procedure.

The interrogation device may include circuitry that may be carried on printed circuit board **264**, or otherwise arranged to communicate to, or interact with, an installed sensor component. A plurality of different test circuits may be provided by simply exchanging the circuit board **264** to one having the desired configuration. Such circuitry may include structure arranged to apply a first time-varying stimulus signal to stimulated electrodes. A currently preferred first stimulus signal is a constant current source, although a constant voltage source is also workable. A preferred first stimulus signal is about 100 kHz 1 mA rms. A second stimulus signal may be provided and coupled to electrodes adapted to detect presence of a fluid wave-front. A preferred second signal is a 1 kHz square wave input to a first electrode and permitting measure-

16

ment of an electric property by using at least one other electrode. Impedance or voltage may be evaluated at or between measurement electrodes. Sometimes, a differential may be measured between electrodes. Other times, ground may be enforced at one electrode, and an electrical property measured at the other electrode. It is within contemplation for one or more electrode to be eliminated entirely, and to use a global ground reference.

FIG. 16 illustrates one workable interrogation circuitry adapted to interrogate a sensor **130**. In the cell interrogation loop, a signal generator **268** is applied between conductors **134** and **144**. It has been determined that electrical ground may be enforced at one of such conductors. In current sensors adapted to interrogate blood cells, it is preferred to apply a constant RMS current signal of about 1 mA at about 100 kHz. Values for voltages V_A and V_B are measured at conductors **136** and **138**, respectively for calculation of a differential voltage across the cell interrogation zone. It has been determined that an electrical ground may be enforced at one such conductor, and the voltage directly measured at the other conductor may be used in place of a true differential voltage. It is also possible to allow one electrode to "float" (i.e. not be connected to anything) and measure the voltage compared to a different electrode. In the fluid detection loop, a signal generator **270** can be applied between conductor **146** and each of conductors **140** and **142**. The impedance or voltage signal V_{S1} and V_{S2} can then be measured to determine the presence of the fluid wave-front. A sudden drop in the measured impedance indicates presence of the wave-front of electrolytic fluid. A workable signal includes a square-wave at about 1 kHz at about 3 volts. FIGS. 17 and 18 present electrically-based interrogation data that may be collected using certain preferred sensors.

In a method of using one embodiment of a device to count cells in a blood sample, 50 micro-liters of fluid are added to the sensor via a pipette-tip hole which is sized to form an air tight fit with the pipette tip. As the sample enters the sample storage channel, air displaced by the fluid exits the cartridge through a vent port that connects to the interrogation device. The sample can be added to the cartridge before or after it has been connected to the interrogation device. Once the sample is in the cartridge, and the cartridge is installed in an interrogation device, the user starts the test by activating one or more "start" control of the system. The "start" causes a valve connected to the vent port to close, thereby not allowing the sample to flow into the vent port. The "start" also opens the vacuum valve to start pulling the fluid sample into the sensor. Because the vent is sealed, fluid is drawn from the sample storage chamber and through the thin film sensor component. A "start" may also initiate a stimulus (e.g. 1 kHz) to the sample detection electrodes embedded in the thin film sensor component. Once the fluid is through the sensing orifice and has wet the stimulus and measurement electrodes, it flows over a pair of sample detection electrodes. As the fluid wave-front reaches the detection position at the second electrode, a large drop in electric impedance is detected and the constant current source is activated (e.g. 100 kHz @ 1 mA). A differential voltage is measured across the interrogation zone (4 electrode configuration, currently preferred) and used to determine cell size (and/or count) subsequent to the time of wave-front detection. Fluid continues to flow until it reaches the end of the "dead-end" channel and no more cells are detected. The volume that is processed in a test run is determined by the volume accommodated downstream of the wave-front detection location, and is 25 micro-liters in a preferred single-use device. The method may also include monitoring one or more additional sample detection electrode

placed further down the channel, i.e. to determine the approximate flow rate during, or prior to starting, the cell counting.

Certain sensor components may include structure to optionally, or alternatively, permit optically-based interrogation of particles entrained in a fluid. It should be noted, for purpose of this disclosure, that the term “wavelength” is typically employed not with reference only to a single specific wavelength, but rather to encompass a spread of wavelengths grouped about a characteristic, or representative, wavelength. With reference to FIG. 19, the characteristic wavelength F1 (e.g. excitation wavelength) of a primary radiation source is sufficiently different from the characteristic wavelength F2 of the fluorescence (e.g. emission wavelength) to enable differentiation between the two. Furthermore, the difference between such characteristic wavelengths, or Stokes shift, is desirably sufficiently different to enable, in certain embodiments, including a selective-pass filter element between the radiation source and optical detector effective to block transmission of primary radiation toward the detector, while permitting transmission of the fluorescence through the selective-pass filter to the detector.

A schematic illustrating a generalized operable arrangement of structure employed in embodiments structured according to certain principles of the invention and enabling optically-based interrogation is indicated generally at 280 in FIG. 20A. As illustrated, embodiment 280 includes an opaque member, generally indicated at 282, disposed between a radiation source 284 and a radiation detector 286. At least one orifice 288 is disposed in opaque member 282 to provide a flow path between a first side, generally indicated at 290, and a second side, generally indicated at 292. Orifice 288 may be characterized as having a through-axis 294 extending between the first and second sides 290 and 292 of opaque member 282, respectively.

Both of the thickness, T1, of an opaque member and characteristic size, D1, of an orifice 288 are typically sized in agreement with a size of a particle of interest to promote single-file travel of the particle through the opaque member, and to have only one particle inside the orifice at a time. In the case where the apparatus is used to interrogate blood cells, the thickness of the opaque member may typically range between about 10 microns and about 300 microns, with a thickness of about 125 microns being currently preferred. The diameter, or other characteristic size of the orifice in such an embodiment, may range between about 5 and 200 microns, with a diameter of about 60 microns being currently preferred in an embodiment adapted to interrogate blood cells.

An operable opaque member 282 functions, in part, to reduce the quantity of unwanted background radiation, including primary radiation 298 (sometimes also called stimulation radiation) that is emitted by source 284, which is received and detected by radiation detector 286. Primary radiation 298 is illustrated as a vector having a direction. Desirably, substantially all of the primary radiation 298 is prevented from being detected by the radiation detector 286. In any case, operable embodiments are structured to resist saturation of the detector 286 by primary radiation 298. As illustrated in the arrangement depicted in FIG. 20A, primary radiation 298 may simply pass through orifice 288 for reception by the radiation detector 286. Therefore, as will be further detailed below, certain embodiments may employ one or more selective radiation filters as a measure to control radiation received by detector 286.

The opaque member 282 illustrated in FIG. 20A includes a core element 302, carrying a first coating 304 disposed on first side 110, and a second coating 306 disposed on second side

112. A workable core 302 for use in detecting small sized particles, such as certain blood cells, can be formed from a thin polymer film, such as PET having a thickness of about 0.005 inches. Such polymer material is substantially permeable to radiation, so one or more coatings, such as either or both of coating 304 and 306, is typically applied to such core material. A workable coating includes a metal or alloy of metals that can be applied as a thin layer, such as by sputtering, vapor deposition, or other well-known technique. Ideally, the metal layer should be about 2-times as thick as the wavelength of the primary radiation, e.g. about 1 μm in one operable embodiment. The resulting metallized film may be essentially impervious to transmission of radiation, except where interrupted by an orifice, such as orifice 288. Aluminum is one metal suitable for application on a core 302 as a coating 304 and/or 306. Of course, it is also within contemplation to alternatively use a bare core element that is, itself, inherently resistant to transmission of radiation. For example, a sheet of metal foil may form an effective opaque member in certain operable embodiments.

The apparatus 280 is configured to urge a plurality of particles 310 into substantially single-file travel through orifice 288. A particle 310 typically passes through an excitation zone as the particle approaches, passes through, and departs from the orifice 288. Of note, the direction of particle-bearing fluid flow may be in either direction through orifice 288. In certain cases, an excitation zone may include the through-channel or tunnel defined by orifice 288. An excitation zone may also include a volume indicated by lower cloud 314, which encompasses a volume in which a particle may reside and be in contact with primary radiation. An excitation zone may further include a volume indicated by upper cloud 316, which also encompasses a volume in which a particle may reside and be in contact with primary radiation.

In certain cases, e.g. where there may be a plurality of orifices, the term “zone” may include a plurality of such distributed zones. However, the appropriate meaning of the term “zone” is believed to be aduceable in context. In the excitation zone, primary radiation 298 causes certain particles to fluoresce, thereby emitting radiation at a different wavelength compared to the primary radiation 298 and in substantially all three-dimensions. The fluorescence radiation emitted by those certain particles may then be detected by the radiation detector 286.

With reference again to FIG. 20A, the embodiment 280 may essentially be disposed in a suitably sized container that is divided into two portions by the opaque member. Flow of fluid (and particles entrained in that fluid) through the orifice 288 could be controlled by a difference in pressure between the two divided portions. However, it is typically desired to provide more control over the flow path of particles in the vicinity of the orifice 288 than such an embodiment would permit. For example, a clump of particles disposed near an entrance or exit of the orifice 288 could shield a particle of interest from the primary radiation 298 to the extent that fluorescence does not occur, thereby causing a miscount, or preventing detection of such a shielded particle of interest. Also, clumped or stacked particles could shield fluorescence that is emitted from a particle of interest from contact with the detector, thereby reducing detection accuracy.

FIG. 20B illustrates an interrogation arrangement, generally 288', that is generally analogous to the system illustrated in FIG. 20A. Analogous elements are sometimes designated with primes. For example, microcapillary tube 318 has a cross-section area 288' and through-axis 294' that are analogous to the aperture 288 and through-axis 294 in FIG. 20A. Primary radiation 298 may be variously detected by radiation

detector **286** as scatter, obstructed, or Stokes' shift radiation. Note that the cross-section area **288** is arbitrarily drawn as a generally rectangular shape, but no particular shape is required for operation of the device **280**'. However, one important function of the microcapillary tube **318** is to inherently urge particles **310** into substantially single-file travel through an interrogation zone.

Because fluorescence propagates from a tagged and excited particle of interest in substantially all directions, the primary radiation may be directed to an excitation zone from a side, instead of only from directly below such zone. With reference now to FIG. 21, sometimes it is preferred to apply primary radiation **298** at an angle **A1** to axis **294** of orifice **288**. In such case, the opaque member **282** may even function substantially as an operable filter to resist direct transmission of primary radiation **298** to a radiation detector **286**. As illustrated, radiation vector **298** can be oriented to pass through, or partially into, orifice **288** without being detected by radiation detector **286**. However, when a tagged particle **320** is present in an excitation zone (such as orifice **288** as illustrated), the resulting fluorescence **322** may still be detected by the radiation detector **286**. While a workable angle **A1** may be between 0 and 90 degrees, it is currently preferred for angle **A1** to be between about 15 and about 75 degrees for certain operable embodiments.

A radiation source **284** may be formed from a broad spectrum radiation emitter, such as a white light source. In such case, it is typically preferred to include a pre-filter **324** adapted to pass, or transmit, radiation only in a relatively narrow band encompassing the characteristic value required to excite a particular fluorescing agent associated with a particle of interest. It is generally a good idea to limit the quantity of applied radiation **298** that is outside the excitation wavelength to reduce likelihood of undesired saturation of the radiation detector **286**, and consequent inability to detect particles of interest.

Certain embodiments apply a red diode laser, and include a short pass filter (after the diode laser) that passes primary light radiation with wavelengths shorter than 640 nm. Such embodiments also may include a band pass filter (prior to the photodetector) with a peak that matches a particular selected fluorescence peak. Commercially available dyes may be obtained having characteristic fluorescent peaks at 660, 694, 725, and 775 nanometers.

With continued reference to FIG. 21, sometimes it is preferred to include a post filter **326** that resists transmission of radiation outside the characteristic wavelength of the fluorescence **322**. Such an arrangement helps to avoid false readings indicative of presence of a particle of interest in an excitation zone. Also, to assist in obtaining a strong signal, an optical enhancement, such as a lens **328**, can be included to gather fluorescence **322** and direct such radiation toward the radiation detector **286**. Illustrated lens **328** may be characterized as a convex focusing lens, and typically is disposed to focus on a point located inside the orifice **288**.

With reference now to FIG. 22, an exemplary plumbing arrangement effective to interrogate particles **320** entrained in fluid is indicated generally at **330**. The interrogation arrangement **330** is illustrated in an installed position with respect to an interrogation device **332**. A workable interrogation device **332** may be embodied in various forms, for example as a bench-top device, or as a hand-held instrument, such as a hand-held pipette adapted to extract one or more sample from a bulk container of fluid.

Desirably, coupling the interrogation arrangement **330** to the interrogation device **332** also places a waveguide, such as light pipe **334** (which, for example, may be a fiber optic

cable), into communication with a radiation source. An operable coupling may either be done in "free space" by simply shining the laser into a fiber (or waveguide), or by butt-coupling two fibers together. The radiation source, such as a laser, can be located at virtually any convenient location in the interrogation device when using the butt-coupling approach.

As illustrated in FIGS. 22 and 23, an end of light pipe **334** may be engaged by coupling device **336** upon insertion of arrangement **330** into seated engagement in device **332**. Coupling device **336** is structured to orient the end of light pipe **334** in an operable receiving position with respect to radiation provided by a radiation source **284**. Desirably, the inner surface of coupler **336** is shaped somewhat like a funnel, to facilitate insertion of a light pipe **334**. Therefore, excitation radiation **298** may be impinged through a coupled light pipe **334** onto an interrogation zone, causing emission or scatter radiation **322** from particles of interest to propagate toward a radiation detector **286**. In an alternative interrogation device, coupling **336** may place a fiber optic cable (e.g. extending from a more remotely located radiation source) into communication with a light pipe **334**, or other waveguide associated with an interrogation arrangement.

Of note, radiation detector **286** may be disposed in proximity to the interrogation site, as suggested by FIG. 22. In such case, wires **338** typically extend from detector **286** to remotely located data collecting devices. Alternatively, radiation detector **286** may be located at a more convenient remote location of the interrogation device **332**, and radiation **322** may be communicated to such remote location by way of a light pipe. As previously indicated, sometimes a focusing element **328**, and/or a filter **326** may be included to modify radiation that is transmitted toward detector **286**, if desired.

Also as illustrated in FIG. 22, coupling the interrogation arrangement **330** to the device **332** desirably places a source of suction into fluid communication with flow aperture **340** to cause a desired flow of sample fluid through interrogation arrangement **330**, indicated by arrows **342**. In the exemplary illustrated embodiment, a source of suction (not illustrated) communicates through passageway **344**, which is in sealed communication through an O-ring **346** to aperture **340**.

With reference again to FIG. 23, sometimes a plumbing arrangement operable to interrogate particles radiologically may also include structure adapted to interrogate a fluid sample in one or more alternative way. For example, one or more electrodes may be carried by a plumbing arrangement and arranged to permit interrogation of one or more electrical property related to a fluid sample. The partially exploded plumbing arrangement of a disposable embodiment generally indicated at **348** includes an opaque layer **350** that carries a plurality of electrically conductive traces (e.g. trace **352**). It should be recognized that layers **353** and **355** are illustrated as being slightly distorted (stretched) to provide clarity as to indicated structure. The conductive traces are configured and arranged to form interrogating electrodes (e.g. **354**, **356**, **358**) that are in electrical communication with connection electrodes or electrically conductive contact pads (e.g. generally indicated at **352** in FIG. 12).

Embodiment **348** exemplifies a multifunction pipette tip that is configured to incorporate both electrical and radiological interrogation of fluid in a single disposable, or sometimes reusable, device. Illustrated embodiment **348** is a multilayer device structured somewhat similarly to a combination of embodiment **130** in FIG. 2 and embodiment **280** in FIG. 20A. As pipette tip **348** is coupled to a pipette (not illustrated), light pipe **334** is directed by the internally conic section of coupling **336** effective to align a proximal end of light pipe **334** with a discharge from radiation source **284**. A fully installed tip **348**

21

automatically has its light pipe **334** positioned to receive radiation from source **282**. Stimulation radiation (light) may then be applied along light pipe **334** to impinge on an interrogation zone associated with the tunnel generally indicated at **228**. Further, coupling pipette tip **348** with a pipette also desirably places a vacuum source into communication with flow aperture **340**.

Also, surface contact electrodes (disposed on the side facing away for the illustrated embodiment **348**) are desirably placed into electrical communication with electrical interrogation circuitry when the pipette tip **348** is seated in an electrically instrumented pipette. Among other uses (such as direct particle counting using measured impedance and the Coulter principle), the electrodes may be arranged to indicate presence of a fluid wave-front at particular locations along a channel, such as a portion of channel **362**. In a preferred arrangement, one or more electrode(s) may be arranged to start and stop a test based upon a feedback obtained from the electrode(s).

In general, some sort of feedback signal can be used to indicate a start condition for a test of a fluid sample (e.g. a signal may be generated electrically or optically to detect the fluid wave-front at a known location along a channel). Similarly, some sort of feedback signal can be used to indicate a stop condition for a test on a sample (e.g. electrically or optically detect the wave-front after filling a desired/known volume. Alternatively, a vacuum shut-off signal may be generated by monitoring amperage of the vacuum pump, which may spike when fluid flow terminates by fluid encountering a barrier at the end of a known-volume chamber that resists fluid flow but permits passage of air). Also, the test volume may be substantially controlled by a known quantity of fluid being aspirated into a cassette or cartridge.

With reference still to FIG. **23**, an electrode (e.g. **354**) may be desirably disposed to indicate the presence of a fluid wave front at the beginning of a length of channel defining a chamber having a known volume corresponding to a desired sample volume size. The signal monitored at electrode **354** may provide a useful start-test signal. A second electrode (e.g. **358**) may be disposed at the other end of the known-volume chamber to provide a stop-test signal. A discontinuous change in impedance measured at an electrode (essentially changing from open-circuit to a measurable value as an electrolytic fluid closes the circuit) can be used to indicate arrival of the fluid wave-front. Such start- and stop-signals may be used to advantage to substantially automate data collection during radiological tests of fluid samples.

Elements of a currently preferred sensor arrangement that may be structured as a cassette, or cartridge, are illustrated with reference to FIGS. **24-28**. An exemplary such sensor arrangement is structured from a plurality of thin film layers that are stacked and bonded together to form cartridge **370**, and consequently provides a microchannel structured to urge particles into substantially single-file travel. With reference to FIG. **28**, cartridge **370** includes top cap layer **372**, top channel layer **374**, interrogation layer **376**, bottom channel layer **378**, and bottom cap layer **380**.

The currently preferred top cap layer **372** and bottom cap layer **380** may be made from 0.005" thick transparent polyester film. Workable channel layers **374** and **378** may be made from 0.010" thick double sided acrylic based adhesive. In such case, the center carrier layer may be 0.007" thick polyester with 0.0015" thick adhesive coated on each side. A currently preferred interrogation layer **376** may be made from an assortment of materials, depending upon the intended use for the particular sensor that will be constructed. A clear 0.005" thick polyester film may be used for sensors structured

22

to interrogate impedance measurements only. It is preferred to employ an opaque polyamide film for sensors structured to interrogate impedance and fluorescence (or just fluorescence). The opaque film inherently resists transmission of undesired radiation toward the Stokes shift detection sensor.

Although such is not required, the illustrated cartridge **370** is a two-ended arrangement structured to provide duplicated structure forming first and second sensors on the same removable device. Such an arrangement permits associating the cassette **370** at a first orientation with an interrogation device, running a first test, then removing and reversing the cassette **370** to interface with the interrogation device at a second orientation to perform a second test. The first and second tests may be the same type of test, performed on different fluid samples. It is within contemplation that the first and second tests may not be the same, and may also be performed on at least a portion of the same fluid sample. For clarity, the duplicated structures included in the second sensor are indicated with a prime. It is within contemplation to provide a multi-ended arrangement providing a further increased number of sensors (e.g. 3, or 4, or more) on the same cassette, or cartridge.

Top cap layer **372** provides a sample loading port **384**, a vent **386**, and a vacuum application port **388**. A plurality of over-size alignment holes **389** are also included. Alignment holes **389** are oversized to provide clearance for other precise alignment structure during assembly of the cartridge **370**. Alternative precision alignment structure may be provided for certain layers, such as **372**, **374**, **378** and **380**. Such alternative alignment structure may then be redacted from the finished cassette during a manufacturing step. Also, in certain embodiments, vent ports **386** are not included.

With reference now to FIG. **24**, interrogation layer **376** carries a plurality of electrical contact pads, generally indicated at **390**. While alternative deposition of conductive material is operable, it is currently preferred to print the contact pads **390** and other conductive traces and structures using electrically conductive ink and a web-based screen printing process that lends itself to mass production.

As illustrated in FIG. **24**, a first trigger electrode **392** and a second trigger electrode **394** are disposed upstream of first driving electrode **396** and first detection electrode **398**, and may therefore detect a trailing, or fluid flow termination, boundary. Such an arrangement permits electrode **392** and **394** to operate as an electrically-based trigger that is inherently tripped by a fluid flow boundary, and can be used to terminate data collection. For example, impedance can be monitored between electrode **392** and electrode **394**. In general, it is desirable for trigger electrodes to be narrow and disposed as close together as possible. The printing capability of the preferred manufacturing method is believed to be the current limit. None-the-less, an electrode area can be fairly small (e.g. 0.025"x0.065") and the current printing process can easily maintain a 0.015" spacing between printed electrodes.

With continued reference to FIG. **24**, a plurality of apertures and channels are removed from the film forming interrogation layer **376**. As illustrated, a partial length channel **400** is disposed to receive a fluid sample for interrogation. The sample is typically loaded at proximal end **402**, and flows in the direction indicated by arrow **404**, toward debris filter **406**. An exemplary debris filter resists passage of undesired particulate matter toward the interrogation aperture **408**. It is currently preferred to laser drill a plurality of small apertures in combination to form a sort of screen-like debris filter **406**. An additional aperture structure includes fluid exit vent **410**. Desirably, exit vent **410** is structured to permit application of

23

vacuum to cause fluid flow through passages in the cartridge 370, and to apply capillary attraction to resist flow of fluid beyond the vent 410, itself.

With particular reference to FIG. 25, the other side of interrogation layer 376 includes additional electrical contact pads, generally 390. In the illustrated embodiment, the electrical contact pads 390 disposed on one side are not integral with electrical contact pads 390 on the other side. Electrically conductive traces are configured to provide a second interrogation electrode 412 and a second driving electrode 414.

Still with reference to FIG. 25, a third trigger electrode 416 and a fourth trigger electrode 418 are disposed down stream of second detection electrode 412 and second driving electrode 414 and may therefore detect a fluid flow arrival boundary. Such an arrangement permits trigger electrode 416 and trigger electrode 418 to operate as an electrically-based trigger that is inherently tripped by a fluid flow boundary, and can be used to begin data collection during the test of a fluid sample.

A fifth trigger electrode 420 and a sixth trigger electrode 422 are also illustrated in FIG. 25 as being disposed down stream of second detection electrode 412 and second driving electrode 414 and may therefore cooperate to detect a fluid flow arrival boundary at a second location. This third trigger is disposed near the vent aperture 410. Such an arrangement permits electrode 420 and 422 to operate as an electrically-based trigger that can be used to detect the "end of test" for a fluid sample when using the known volume method with respect to the volume in channel 442.

For convenience, electrode surface contact pad 424 is in electrical communication with both of electrode 418 and 420, and can therefore be used to apply a common reference signal, such as ground. On the other side of layer 376, electrical contact pads 426 and 428 are in electrical communication and may be used in a continuity check to verify proper insertion of a sensor into engagement in a preferred interrogation device. It should be noted that certain sensors may be constructed having a different number of driving, detecting, verification, and/or trigger electrodes, or even none.

Layer 376 also includes a plurality of alignment apertures. Alignment aperture 430 is common to alignment structure used for both ends of the cartridge 370, and imposes an X-Y location at a known reference spot on the cartridge 370 with respect to a currently preferred interrogation device. Alignment slot 432 imposes substantially only a rotational orientation of an installed cartridge 370 with respect to that X-Y location. Desirably, one of the apertures 430, 432 is slotted, and the other is not. Such an arrangement is effective to provide a complete rigid body constraint in a plane, and helps to avoid binding of the cassette during its installation into, or removal from, an interrogation device. The radius of illustrated round alignment aperture 430 is 0.050". The distance between the radii of alignment slot 432 is 0.025" and the radii are 0.050". Cooperating alignment pins in the preferred interrogation device have diameters of 0.1000", and the pins are precision ground to a tolerance of +0.0001". Planar orientation of the cartridge is typically enforced by other clamping structure associated with the preferred interrogation device.

With reference now to FIG. 26, top channel layer 374 includes a plurality of channel structures. Partial-length fluid receiving channel 400a cooperates with channel 400 in layer 376 to permit introduced sample fluid to flow in the direction indicated by arrow 404. Bridge channel 436 transports fluid from debris filter 406 toward interrogation aperture 408. An optional dogleg channel portion 438 may communicate to an optional vent 386 (see FIG. 28) at the top of the cartridge 370, and facilitates loading a fluid sample into the cartridge 370.

24

Buffer channel 440 communicates from exit vent 410 toward a vacuum port 388 (see FIG. 28) on top of the cartridge 370. Along with over-size apertures 389, alignment apertures 430a and 432a are also pulled back during a manufacture step to avoid causing a potential structural interference with respect to alignment apertures 430 and 432 disposed in penetration through the interrogation layer.

With reference now to FIG. 27, bottom channel layer 378 carries full-length sample receiving channel 400b. Channel 400b communicates introduced fluid underneath layer 376 to the bottom of debris filter 406. Channel 442 receive fluid downstream of interrogation aperture 408. In certain embodiments, a first electrically-based trigger, generally indicated at 444, is disposed near one end of the chamber formed by channel 442. A workable trigger may be formed between two dedicated electrodes, or sometimes between one dedicated electrode and a shared electrode. Illustrated trigger 444 in FIG. 27 is formed between electrodes 414 and 418 (see FIG. 25). A trigger at a location such as trigger 444 is operable as a "start" trigger, to begin collection of data during an interrogation of a fluid sample. It has been determined that a single impedance-detecting electrode, such as 418, cooperating with a sink electrode 414 is more reliable than a cooperating dedicated pair of electrodes (e.g. 414 and 416, FIG. 35) disposed in very close association with a sink electrode such as 414.

A second electrically-based trigger, generally 446, may be disposed spaced apart from trigger 444 by a known volume provided by channel 442. Illustrated trigger 446 is formed by electrodes 420 and 422 (see FIG. 25). In certain cases, a second known volume may be defined by channel and aperture structure disposed between trigger 444 and an upstream trigger, such as may be formed between electrodes 392 and 394 (see FIG. 24).

Known volumetric trigger spacing and collection of data signals including a common time component or base, permit: starting and stopping test data collection; control for application of vacuum; confirmation of processing a desired sample volume; and calculation of volumetric rate of processing, among other attributes.

With reference again to FIG. 28, the fluid flow path will now be described. In one type of test, a sample is typically introduced to sample loading port 384 using a pipette instrument to accurately dispense a desired test volume, or sometimes a surplus volume. Entering fluid flow is represented by arrows 450a, 450b and 450c. Sample fluid then flows along a channel formed by channel portions 400, 400a, and 400b in the direction indicated by arrow 404. As indicated by arrows 452a and 452b, fluid flow through debris filter 406 to channel 436. Air may be passed out aperture 386, as indicated by arrow 454. During a test, fluid flows along channel 436 in the direction indicated by arrow 456. Fluid then flows through interrogation aperture 408 as indicated by partially hidden arrows 458a and 458b. Fluid flow in channel 442 is indicated by arrow 460. Fluid then flows through vent 410 as indicated by arrows 462a and 462b. Fluid then flows along channel 440 in layer 374, in the direction indicated by arrow 464, before potentially exiting vacuum port 388, indicated by arrow 466. In certain cases, channel 440 may provide a buffer to resist escape of fluid from a cartridge 370.

Typically, an Excimer laser is used to form the interrogation apertures 408 and alignment apertures 430 and 432. A DPSS laser is generally used to form all of the other channel and aperture structure (filters, vents, channels, etc.). The excimer can cut the currently preferred 55 μm diameter interrogation aperture 408 within ± 2 microns. Repeatability of the DPSS is more like plus/minus 5 microns. The large alignment

25

holes **430**, **432** are manufactured (laser cut) with extreme precision relative to the laser drilled interrogation aperture **108**. Use of the more accurate laser allows the interrogation aperture **408** to be mechanically aligned, from cassette to cassette, to the laser beam of a cooperating docking station of a preferred interrogation device with an accuracy of about 20 μm to 50 μm . Here, "accuracy" means that the center of the aperture is disposed within a certain radius of the theoretical centerline of an interrogation zone provided by a cooperatively structured interrogation device.

With reference now to FIG. **29**, it is within contemplation to use a single sensor a plurality of times. For example, a single cartridge or cassette, generally indicated at **470**, can be used to process a plurality of similar, or different, fluid samples in series. Cartridge **470** may be double-ended as illustrated, further multiple-ended, or a single-ended cartridge, as desired. In any case, a source to urge fluid motion, such as vacuum pump **472**, may be applied to a container in which to receive a quantity of fluid samples and potential cleaning flushes between tests. Suction from the container may be applied to the cartridge **470** to effect a test, and the fluid sample (and optional flush fluid) may then be extracted from the cartridge **470** for storage in the container **474**. Workable cleaning/flushing fluids include distilled water, water with detergents, saline, and low bleach concentration in water. In certain cases, a gas, such as air, may be used as an operable cleaning fluid. The level of stored fluid **476** can be monitored by a level control system, generally **478**. An operable control system may include a simple float switch, or an electrical impedance sensing circuit. It is alternatively within contemplation to use an optically-based monitoring system for level control, or simply to keep track of the individual sample volume(s) and number of tests performed since the holding chamber was emptied or replaced. A holding chamber **474** may be structured as a portion of an interrogation device, generally **480**. Alternatively, storage container **474** may be included as a portion of an alternative sensor **482**.

FIGS. **30-32** illustrate one currently preferred interrogation device, generally **490**, for use with certain preferred sensor arrangements structured according to certain principles of the instant invention. In FIG. **30**, a representative sensor arrangement **370** is ready to load into the device **490**. Cassette **370** is received in entrance structure **492**, which facilitates alignment of the cassette, and orients the cassette **370** in a plane. Alignment pins **494** enforce an X-Y position on an installed cassette **370** and also a rotational relationship of the cassette **370** with respect to that X-Y position. Such alignment urges the interrogation aperture **408** into operable alignment with an applied source of radiation and with respect to optical detector **496** effective to detect Stokes' shift phenomena that may occur in the interrogation zone. Electrical contact prongs (e.g. edge connectors) and appropriate electronic devices, may be included in a device **490** to permit electrically-based particle interrogation, as well, or instead. The vacuum ports are desirably located near the alignment pins so the cassette only needs to be clamped in one location. The clamping step preferably makes the vacuum seal and accurately positions the interrogation orifice.

FIGS. **33** and **34** illustrate an alternative interrogation device, or device, generally at **500**. Installation of a test cassette **502** causes a clamping force between the cassette **502** and a vent seal, such as O-ring **504**, as well as places a vacuum source into communication with a vacuum application port **388**. An air resistant connection may be effected at the vacuum port with an O-ring, as well. Electrical contact pads **390** of an installed cassette **502** are inherently placed into electrical communication with appropriate pins of electrical

26

connectors, such as edge connector **506**. Of course, such electrical connectors are disposed for contact with electrodes **390** that are carried on either of, or both of, top and bottom of an installed cassette **502**, as the case may be.

With reference now to FIG. **35**, the particle sensor embodied in the test cassette generally indicated at **520** is adapted to permit interrogating a plurality of discrete fluid samples in series. Each successive fluid sample may be input to cassette **520** by way of pipetting a dose of fluid into sample port **522**. Desirably, successive fluid samples may be input into the cassette **520** without removing the cassette from an interrogation device between samples. A vent **524** may be provided to facilitate loading each fluid sample into cassette **520**. Alignment apertures **430** and **432** help to align the cassette **520** upon installation in an interrogation device, such as device **490** or device **500**. Certain cassettes **520** may include electrode contact pads **390**, and generally be structured similar to the cartridge **370**. One difference, however, is the reservoir **528**, which permits storing a plurality of interrogated fluid sample on-board the cassette **520**. Desirably, reservoir **528** is sized to contain a plurality of fluid samples and also a plurality of doses of cassette-cleaning flush fluids that may be vacuumed through the cassette **520** between each interrogated fluid sample. Vacuum is applied at vacuum port **530**, and samples (and flush or cleaning fluids, if used) collect inside reservoir **528**. One embodiment of a cassette is structured to perform at least 10 tests. Providing for about 75 μl fluid sample per test (times 10), plus about 50 μl of cleaner fluid in between test samples (times 9) requires a reservoir **528** to accommodate at least about 1.25 ml total fluid volume. A cassette **520** may be structured to permit interrogation of fluid samples using Stokes' Shift phenomena, and/or by monitoring an electrical phenomena, such as the Coulter principle, or difference between an open-circuit and a closed-circuit.

In one method of use of a preferred embodiment, a sensor structured as a cassette is loaded into registration, at a first orientation, in an interrogation device. A fluid sample may be loaded into the cassette either before, or after, installing the cassette in the interrogation device. The fluid sample is urged to flow through the cassette, typically by application of a vacuum at an end of a lumen opposite the sample entrance port.

Sometimes, a known volume of fluid is transferred to the cassette for a given sample. In certain such cases, the fluid sample may be urged to flow through the cassette, and one or more triggers may indicate a "start" and/or "stop" for collection of test data. For example, impedance at a first location along a lumen (e.g. downstream of fully wetted interrogation electrodes or a Stokes' shift interrogation zone) may be monitored, and when a fluid wave front is detected, data collection may be started. Data collection may be stopped when a fluid wave front is detected at a second location (e.g. upstream of fully wetted interrogation electrodes or a Stokes' shift interrogation zone). The known volume of the lumen between the first and second locations may then be subtracted from the transferred volume of fluid to calculate a volume of interrogated fluid.

For example, in one currently preferred arrangement, the user just pipettes 75 μL of sample into the receiving channel of a cassette. It helps to tilt the cassette to have gravity assist the filling. The cassette is installed in registration in an interrogation device, and vacuum is applied. Counting begins when the approaching fluid wave front is detected at a start trigger location, e.g. disposed downstream of the interrogation aperture and all driving and detecting electrodes. Counting is stopped, and vacuum removed, once a stop trigger

detects the trailing fluid wave front. In a preferred cassette, about 25 μ l of fluid is disposed in the volume between the start and stop triggers, so a 50 μ l sample is interrogated.

In steps of another method, data collection may be terminated when a fluid wave front is detected at a trigger location spaced apart downstream of the first location by a known volume (at a third location). Sometimes, the trigger at the third location may be used as a redundant signal, or safety signal, to resist undesired escape of fluid from confinement inside the cassette. For example, a safety signal can be used to terminate application of vacuum to stop flow of fluid through the cassette.

In certain cases, after a first fluid sample is processed, the cassette is removed, and reinstalled in registration in the interrogation device at a second orientation to process a subsequent second fluid sample. Sometimes, certain two-ended cassettes are rotated by 180 degrees between such first and second fluid samples. In certain alternative cases, a vacuum is used to pull all fluid of one fluid sample past the interrogation zone and/or electrodes, and a new sample may subsequently be introduced to a cassette. Successive fluid samples are generally stored in a container, which may be carried by a cassette, or associated with an interrogation device. In certain situations, it is desirable for the cassette to remain installed in the interrogation device between samples, although such is not required. It is further within contemplation to flush, or clean, a lumen through a cassette by drawing a quantity of cleaning fluid (potentially including a gaseous fluid, such as air) through the cassette between serial interrogation of fluid samples.

It is desirable to monitor the “health” of a particle alignment element, to verify that the interrogation zone is not compromised, i.e. clogged by particulate matter. One way to do so includes use of a differential +15V–15V constant current stimulus (e.g. apply the –15V on a “sink” electrode) and a differential measurement technique across an interrogation aperture. Therefore, the measured voltage across the aperture is close to zero when the sensor is filled with conductive media. When a cell passes through the aperture, the measured voltage increases momentarily. If a blockage occurs, the voltage usually rails to +15V (momentarily). It generally settles back down shortly thereafter, because the interrogation device is AC coupled. A lack of particle or scatter data (e.g. electrically, or optically detected) would indicate blockage of a capillary lumen, or a dry central column of a sheathed-flow arrangement. It is also preferred to measure the total time of the counting and if it exceeds some amount (like one minute), to stop the test and report “aperture block, or an analogous information statement.

One exemplary embodiment of a microfluidic interrogation device structured according to certain principles of the invention, generally **540**, is illustrated in FIGS. 36–42. Illustrated device **540** includes a housing **544** structured to protect internally contained elements. A door **548** may be included to provide access for loading a fluid sample (e.g. in a cassette or cartridge), for interrogation of the fluid sample in a microfluidic path extending through a portion of the housing **544**. Desirably, some sort of tab, handle, or mechanism **550** (see FIG. 37) is provided to facilitate opening, closing, or maintaining closed, the door **548**.

A currently preferred microfluidic interrogation device **540** is structured and arranged as a self-contained, or stand-alone, device to permit its operation to perform a microfluidic interrogation on a fluid sample, to process resulting microfluidic interrogation data, and to display a corresponding result on a display device, all without requiring input from a remote computing device. For purpose of this disclosure,

“remote” is defined as being disposed exterior to protection provided by the housing. Further, the term “self-contained” or “stand-alone” means being able to perform the recited interrogation, processing, and display tasks without requiring communication to another device (e.g. without requiring communication with a separate: stand-alone computer, normally stationary computerized work station, or non-integrated portable hand-held computing device). However, microfluidic interrogation devices structured according to certain principles of the invention may be configured to permit coupling to a remote computing device effective to upload data obtained from particle interrogation by the interrogation device, or otherwise structured to permit off-loading such data.

Preferred embodiments of a device **540** are “portable”. That means, a single person can move the device **540**, without assistance or requiring use of tools, from a first location to a second location that is remote from the first location. Therefore, it is desired that a device **540** weighs less than about 50 pounds, and preferably less than about 15 pounds. Also, it is desirable for a device **540** to be sized small enough to permit ergonomic handling by a single person to effect a move between such first and second locations. Desirably, a device **540** is sized smaller than certain kitchen appliances, such as a microwave, toaster oven, or large toaster. That is, workable embodiments will typically fit into a volume of about 24 inches in height H (see FIG. 39), by about 24 inches in width W, by about 24 inches in depth D (see FIG. 40). A preferred embodiment has a housing **544** that defines a volume smaller than that defined by a plan form of about 12 inches by about 9 inches and an orthogonal height of about 9 inches. One currently preferred embodiment is about 4½ inches×about 4½ inches×about 8 inches in H, W, D, respectively.

A display screen **552** is typically used to provide user inputs to a microfluidic interrogation device **540** and to show results of interrogation. One operable display screen **552** is embodied as a custom color LCD touch display with an integrated touch controller. A user can either touch the screen surface **556** to enter data (e.g. in response to a question or to make a selection from one or more choice shown on the screen, like input to an iPad™ or to a “smart” telephone), or move a cursor around to select options (such as to analyze data, or insert or remove a cassette). There is typically also a power on/off button **560**. An operable display screen **552** is exemplified by a model from Truly Displays currently available on the world wide web at trulydisplays.com/tft/index.html. The display screen **552** is generally run and managed by a primary microprocessor. One operable microprocessor is exemplified by a ColdFire processor currently available on the world wide web at freescale.com/webapp/sps/site/homepage.jsp?code=PC68KCF.

An operable microfluidic interrogation system **540** can include a display screen **552** embodied as either: 1) a touch-screen display (e.g. LCD, preferably color-capable) driven by a microprocessor running Linux™, Windows™, or some other operating system; or 2) an off-the-shelf tablet or personal computing device from a third party such as HP (Slate 2™), Microsoft (Surface™), Apple (iPad™), etc. In the latter case, the tablet or personal computing device can be used to control the microprocessor in a device **540** to start and/or stop tests, collect, analyze, and display the data, etc., as desired. Such a tablet or personal computing device may also sometimes completely replace the microprocessor. Desirably, the tablet or personal computing device would be sufficiently integrated into a stand-alone bench-top microfluidic interrogation device **540** so that it appears to be an integral part of the system.

In general, fluid to be interrogated flows through a microfluidic path, channel, or conduit structure that is at least partially encased inside the housing **544**. Desirably, a portion of such a microfluidic channel may be removed from a microfluidic interrogation device **540**. For example, the removable channel portion may be cleaned and reinstalled, or replaced by an alternative portion having different operational capabilities. Such removable structure provides flexibility in particle analysis, and robust, reliable, test performance. A removable microchannel portion may sometimes be embodied within structures previously made reference to as a sensor, sensor component, cassette, cartridge, or capillary tube, and the like.

In FIG. 37, door **548** is shown in the open position, to permit installation of a cassette in registration with receiving structure **564**. Desirably, receiving structure **564** is configured to orient a successive plurality of cassettes in substantially the same orientation with respect to communication or interrogation structures. For example, it is desirable that any electrical connectors of a cassette are automatically positioned to couple with cooperating electrical connectors of a device **540**. Similarly, an interrogation zone of an installed cassette is desirably caused to be positioned in a at least substantially consistent desired position with respect to an applied beam of stimulation radiation.

In certain cases, provision may be made to couple an interrogation device **540** to an external computer or electrical utility. With reference now to FIG. 38, a USB port, generally **568**, is provided on the rear of housing **544**. Such USB port **568** permits uploading test data, as well as powering the device **540** directly, or recharging an on-board battery. Of course, a power cord can also be provided in certain alternative devices **540** to permit plugging in to an electrical wall socket for electrical power.

Certain internal elements of an exemplary device **540** are illustrated in FIG. 41, including battery **572**, and pump **576**. On-board battery **572** permits operation of device **540** untethered from an electric utility. Electric air pump **576** is one example of a fluid motive source effective to urge flow of fluid for purpose of particle interrogation. Automatic, automated, or even manually-operated, such as a syringe pump, fluid-motive sources are also workable. A workable source can apply either positive or negative pressure to urge fluid flow through an interrogation zone. It should be noted that certain fluid motive sources do not require application of a pressure differential, such as in certain capillary-based systems.

Also illustrated in FIG. 41 are printed circuit boards (PCBs) **580**, **581** and photo-multiplying tube **584**. PCB **580** is attached to PMT **584** for convenience in packaging. As is well known in the art, PCBs **580**, **581** carry exemplary conductive elements effective to place certain elements carried inside housing **544** operably in-circuit. Any of the PCBs can carry electric circuit elements, such as illustrated in FIG. 16, effective to form electrical property interrogation circuits (e.g. to detect the Coulter effect), disposed in-circuit with the microprocessor. The ribbon connector **592** (see FIG. 42) is part of another well-known assembly effective to place elements of a device **540** operably in-circuit. Ribbon cable or individual wires provide a convenient way to communicate between PCBs and/or elements of a device **540** to place such elements operably in-circuit.

With reference again to FIG. 41, it is currently desirable to include a focusing assembly, generally **588**. Illustrated focusing assembly **588** includes a lens and filters to increase the amount of desired radiation received by PMT **584**.

With reference now to FIG. 42, sometimes a proximity sensor, such as IR sensor **596** may be employed to ensure the

device is in a desired test configuration (such as to make sure door **548** is closed). The solenoid **600** is connected through tubing **604** (only partially illustrated) to pump **576**. Solenoid **600** may be used to regulate the applied pressure, as previously detailed. Partially illustrated tubing fragment **608** communicates to an installed cassette effective to urge fluid flow through an interrogation zone.

FIGS. 42-44 illustrate an operable arrangement to couple a laser aiming assembly, generally **612**, and a cassette tray **616** effective to permit positional adjustment between an interrogation zone of an installed cassette and an applied beam of stimulation radiation. In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 42, cassette tray **616** is structured cooperatively with individual cassettes to receive each one of a consecutive plurality of cassettes in substantially the same orientation and position. Structure such as door linkage **618** may be provided to urge a cassette into seated engagement when door **548** is closed.

In general, an operable laser aiming assembly **612** includes one or more mechanism effective to fine-tune the location into which excitation radiation is impinged. In general, the position of a cassette (or other device containing the interrogation zone) can be moved with respect to the excitation radiation; or, the excitation radiation can be moved with respect to the interrogation zone. Excitation radiation can be directed to a desired position by aiming its origination beam, or redirecting that beam (e.g. with one or more mirror).

Exemplary laser aiming assembly **612** illustrated in FIGS. 42-44 includes a laser mount **620** that is structured to hold a device, such as laser **622**, which can impinge excitation radiation **624** into a desired interrogation location. The laser beam **624** is aimed by a pair of motors **628** and their respectively driven cams **632**. The laser mount **620** is held at a pivot location, generally indicated at **636** in FIG. 44. The motors **628** and cams **632** variably press on laser mount **620** to sweep the laser beam **624** to a desired impingement location. Laser mount **620** is urged toward engagement with cams **632** by a compression spring, generally **640**, and a torsion spring, generally **644**. Alternative mechanisms effective to steer the output of a laser are within the abilities of one of ordinary skill in the art.

Known cytometers employ thermal electric cooling units with closed loop temperature feedback in the conventional approach of one-time laser alignment during initial manufacture. Such systems generally require the lasers be turned on about 30 min before use, so that the system thermally stabilizes. In contrast, currently preferred interrogation devices **540** structured according to certain principles of the invention do the opposite.

Importantly, laser mount **620** is structured as a heat sink to cool off the laser **622**. A plurality of fins **640** are provided to facilitate dissipation of heat from laser **622**. It is currently preferred to turn the laser **622** on just when needed, and turn it off before it overheats. The preferred laser mount **620** includes an Aluminum substrate operable as a heat sink and that is machined to have fins **640** on it to help dissipate the heat. It is also generally desirable to provide a small fan (not illustrated) to blow air on the heat sink fins **640**.

It is preferred for the alignment to occur on demand automatically under software control, or on user demand, or during each test, or as otherwise desired, even manually. Instead of aligning the laser once at the factory so that it's perfect, and hope that it doesn't move (which it always does), it is preferred to align the laser to the interrogation zone, and then perform that alignment each time prior to performing a test (e.g. when a cassette is inserted into the device **540**). This way, the "system" is never out of alignment and never requires service to bring it back into alignment. In one

31

embodiment, feedback from a PMT is used to determine when the laser is perfectly aligned to the interrogation zone. Alignment may be automated and very quickly performed. The entire heat sink/mount illustrated in FIG. 44 pivots on the post on the far right that threads into the base plate. A spring pushes down on the hole about the post (spring not shown). The two cams 632 are mounted on separate gear motors 628 with encoder-based position feedback. As each motor 628 is turned, the cams 632 move the laser mount 620 up and down thereby causing the laser beam 624 to sweep the target (e.g. aperture 114).

It is within contemplation that an interrogation device 540 may be structured to detect Coulter principle phenomena, and/or radiation, such as Stokes' shift, or even simple side scatter. Therefore, electronic circuitry to apply one or more signal and detect one or more electrical property in an interrogation zone may be included in certain devices 540. Further one or more sensor effective to detect radiation (e.g. a PMT), may be included in certain devices 540.

A portion of an exemplary alternative interrogation device is illustrated generally at 540' in FIG. 45. Interrogation device 540' includes a plurality of PMTs 644-647. Radiation from an interrogation zone may be filtered by a filter element 648 before reflecting from mirror 652 for parsing by a plurality of downstream dichroic elements 656-658. Any remaining radiation is reflected from mirror element 660 toward PMT 644. Of course, electronic circuitry to apply one or more signal and detect one or more electrical property in an interrogation zone may also be included in certain devices 540'. Of note, embodiment 540' includes a mirror tilting mechanism, generally indicated at 664, effective to aim excitation radiation to a desired location.

Preferred embodiments may be programmed for signal processing that performs peak finding in the raw data by combining raw data from two or more detectors. Operable such detectors include both optical property-based and electrical property-based sensors or detectors. Usually, we tell the system to peak find (i.e., detect an "event") using either an electrical property-based signal or an optically-based signal. We then use either 1) a floating base line average method, or 2) a simple threshold method to detect when an actual peak occurs. The floating base-line methods just looks at the last certain number of points and averages them to determine a value for the electrical property-based signal of the base line at that moment in time. Such certain number of points may be a pre-programmed value, or a user input parameter. If a new measured electrical property-based signal value is greater than some (pre-determined) value MORE than the average base-line value, then this is considered to be a peak and the maxima is found. The simple threshold method just looks for peaks in a monitored signal greater than some predetermined value and finds the maxima of each such peak. Once a peak is found on either an electrical property-based signal or optically-based signal channel, data from one or more other channel is scrutinized (e.g. to determine the value in a corresponding peak, or sometimes, simply to extract the measured value).

For some operable devices 540, an optically-based (PMT) signal occurs about 20 microseconds before the corresponding electrical property-based signal peak, but other systems have the peaks occurring at almost the exact same time. With reference to FIGS. 46-48, point A is found as a peak in Coulter phenomena data. The value of the PMT signal at a corresponding time is found in FIG. 47, and the X-Y value is plotted in FIG. 48. If an electrical property-based signal is used to find the an event (and measure the particle size such as point B in FIG. 46) but no corresponding PMT peak can be

32

found, we simply use the PMT voltage level measured at the same time that the electrical property-based signal peak was found (e.g. FIG. 47) and plot the corresponding point B as in FIG. 48. Plots for PMT vs. PMT data are very similar in concept as PMT vs. electrical property-based signal (e.g. Stokes' shift vs. Coulter effect). The PMT vs. PMT method would look for signals indicating presence of cells (particles) on one of the PMTs and then look for corresponding peaks on another PMT (at corresponding times).

Desirably, particle data can be plotted on the display 552 in real time. One embodiment 540 generates a dot plot (see FIG. 49) for display, although a histogram may also, or alternatively be shown, as well as various X-Y plots, numeric values, pie charts, and other known graphical and/or numerical forms of display.

While the invention has been described in particular with reference to certain illustrated embodiments, such is not intended to limit the scope of the invention. The present invention may be embodied in other specific forms without departing from its spirit or essential characteristics. The described embodiments are to be considered as illustrative and not restrictive. The scope of the invention is, therefore, indicated by the appended claims rather than by the foregoing description. All changes which come within the meaning and range of equivalency of the claims are to be embraced within their scope.

What is claimed is:

1. A microfluidic interrogation apparatus, comprising:
 - a bench-top housing sized sufficiently small in both weight and enclosed volume as to permit a single person, by hand and without tools, to move the entirety of said apparatus from a first location to a second location;
 - a microprocessor and an associated memory protected by said housing and operably disposable in-circuit with a microfluidic particle detector to receive particle-related data from said particle detector, said microprocessor being programmable to perform a plurality of different particle interrogation tasks;
 - a microfluidic path extending through a portion of said housing and arranged to urge particles carried in a fluid into substantially single-file travel through an interrogation zone of said particle detector; and
 - a display device carried by said housing and disposed operably in-circuit with said microprocessor, said display device being operable to present a visual image representative of particle interrogation data resulting from microfluidic interrogation performed by said apparatus.
2. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
 - said housing is sized to fit inside a volume of about 24 inches in height by about 24 inches in width by about 24 inches in depth.
3. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
 - said housing defines a volume that is smaller than defined by a plan form of about 12 inches by about 9 inches and an orthogonal height of about 9 inches.
4. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
 - said apparatus is structured to weigh less than about 50 pounds.
5. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
 - said apparatus is structured to weigh less than about 15 pounds.
6. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
 - said microfluidic particle detector is structured to operate under, or detect, either or both of, the Coulter principle and optically-based phenomena (more broadly than e.g. Stoke's shift, includes side scatter).

33

7. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
said microfluidic particle detector operates to detect scatter radiation.
8. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
said microfluidic particle detector comprises a laser configured and arranged in operable combination with a heat sink to permit turning said laser on momentarily for purpose of particle interrogation and turning said laser off before it overheats.
9. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
said microfluidic particle detector comprises a laser and an adjustable laser mounting mechanism, said laser mounting mechanism being adjustable responsive to feedback from a photodetector to permit orienting said laser for impingement of energy emitted by said laser onto a desired location in said interrogation zone.
10. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
said particle detector comprises a plurality of optically-based detectors.
11. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
said microprocessor is programmed for signal processing that performs peak finding in the raw data by combining raw data from a plurality of optically-based detectors.
12. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
said microprocessor is programmed for signal processing that performs peak finding in the raw data by combining data from an electrically-based detector and from at least one optically-based detector.
13. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
said display device comprises a touch-screen disposed in-circuit with said microprocessor and structured to receive input from a user effective to perform a task that may be selected from a plurality of programmed tasks.
14. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
said apparatus is structured and arranged as a self-contained device to permit operation of said apparatus to perform a microfluidic interrogation on a fluid sample, to process resulting microfluidic interrogation data, and

34

- to display a corresponding result on said display device without requiring input from a remote computing device.
15. The apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising:
a source of radiation disposed to impinge radiation onto particles in said interrogation zone; and
a first photodetector disposed to detect radiation propagating from said interrogation zone, and
arranged in-circuit to communicate a signal, corresponding to detected radiation, to said microprocessor.
16. The apparatus according to claim 15, wherein:
said apparatus is structured and arranged to permit coupling said apparatus to a computing device that is disposed exterior to said housing effective to upload data obtained from particle interrogation by said apparatus.
17. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
a portion of said microfluidic path is removable from said housing.
18. The apparatus according to claim 17, wherein:
said microfluidic particle detector comprises said removable portion of said microfluidic path.
19. The apparatus according to claim 17, wherein:
said portion of said microfluidic path is removable in a tool-free operation.
20. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein:
said interrogation zone is disposed in said microfluidic path, and is defined by structure forming non-sheath fluid flow.
21. The apparatus according to claim 20, wherein:
said interrogation zone is defined, at least in part, by a microcapillary lumen.
22. The apparatus according to claim 20, wherein:
said interrogation zone is defined, at least in part, by an aperture disposed to permit fluid flow from a first channel disposed in a first thin film layer, through said aperture, and into a second channel disposed in a second thin film layer.

* * * * *